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Why the Sky Stays Up

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by
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Acknowledgments:

Thank you to my mother for her unwavering presence and constant light in my life.

Thank you to the mentors, professors, friends and strangers who have altered my course and led me to the places I am and have been.

And thank you to my Senior Project advisor, the most wonderful, Brad Morrow.

For my father.

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"What is the nature of the search? you ask. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair."

-- Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

Why the Sky Stays Up

The child was born to woman with hands like parchment and a man who smelled of oil and rust. His first breath was a fractured wail, then a retreat into silence. Then the second, minutes and artificial breathes later, was louder, more boisterous. He only died for a moment, less than a minute before they saved him. The second breath was sparked by the feeling of chilled metal against flesh. The gloved hands, breathed for the child. His birth was also his first death. The first death was quick and uneventful. This death, like his second, was thought of in fleeting moments; it was tucked away, and it was spoken of, never. He knew of his first death, not before his second death, maybe *in* his second death. Maybe he knew after his second death. Maybe, in the space he came to occupy, his limbs and bodily internal spaces returned to that same sort of electricity—the incineration of bones.

On the night of his birth, three women and one man died in the hospital. On the same night and morning that trickled into day, three other babies were born. He was lucky the nurses

said, the doctors too; all the people in starched white agreed. They said he was lucky because he was alive and because his birthday was so close to Christmas.

You will only need to buy him one gift, or maybe two, they told his mother.

The mother smiled.

One for his birth and one for his savior, one nurse said.

She continued to smile.

*

I. The first woman, who died that night, died from cancer. She smelled of talcum powder as she died. The first woman thought that *this* may be better if she wasn't alone. She was consumed by the complications of her seventy years on the earth. Her age, the malign cells that continued to multiply just beneath her skull were what did her in. Perhaps, she wouldn't care if anyone was there anyway, she thought to herself in the days before her decline. In the days after, she lived in a sugary sweet dream. A feverish dream that was somehow familiar and comfortable. In one of the few dreams, she remembered she was a child once again on her father's dairy farm. The veterinarian had come to treat one of the heifers. The woman watched herself stroke the cow's dish-like forehead. She was the sole occupant of the hundred-something stanchion barn. The cow's eyes were soft and the the woman felt the coarseness of the whiskers beneath her chin. The cow had a faint trail of black flecks trickling down her muzzle, the rest a delicate pink.

The veterinarian arrived shortly after, a large man with a receding hairline and green overalls. He carried his plastic bucket of long twisted metal prongs in one hand, the frayed rope

to cinch around the cow's head in the other. The veterinarian sunk a needle into her neck and she collapsed onto the concrete a few seconds later, legs slightly writhing, fighting the artificial drowsiness. They tugged ropes around her ankles and threaded them around the rafters above. All was done with a medical proficiency that could only have be produced by repetition. The cow surgeon spliced the cow's stomach neatly down the middle. The woman gagged, and he, elbows deep, rummaged through the cow's intestines. Another child lazily pinched her fleshy, pale pink interior. His elbows were coated in her liquids as he untangled her large intestine.

Sometime they just get screwed up right around. They got too much intestine and they're too stupid to do anything 'bout it. Not sure if they could anyway, the veterinarian said.

Can she feel it? the woman asked in her dream.

The vet turned to her and laughed—a hoarse sound.

It's like dying, he said, she doesn't feel anything, but she'll wake up sore.

He slapped her side with his gloved palm; a handprint outlined on a white spot and her tongue drooped lazily across the concrete.

The woman woke from this dream, or at least she thought so and laid in the stark whiteness of the hospice ward covered in a heavy sweat. She remembered the heifer struggling to her feet, still drowsy from the sedative. The cow calmly looked to each of her sides before ambling down the aisle and into the rich spring pasture.

II. The second woman had eyes masked by the droop of her wrinkled skin. The veins and liver spots on the backsides of her hands presented as a decorative landscape or a faint intricate tattoo. One of her grandchildren pressed the veins down, took satisfaction in the *smoosh* of the skin before she swatted his hands away. The old woman died wearing pearl earrings sometime in the moments before sunset. Her family was full and present—children, grandchildren, even

great-grandchildren on the way. She outlived her husband and her two sisters. She was the youngest and now the oldest to go. She picked out a blue suit dress as her last and final outfit and slept with a wooden rosary beneath her lace pillow case. She was known for her quilts and her casserole. The children will not forget her, some of the grandchildren will, and the great-grandchildren will never know her.

III. The man was thirty-four. His death was marked by the smell of smoke, oil, and the alcohol slickened vision of an eighteen-year-old who piloted his parent's Chrysler. The death was inconsequential. His own parents were dead. His return from the war, ten years prior, left him to stare for long periods of time, left him to flinch at obtrusive sounds, left him to prefer the pale darkness of his one bedroom apartment and the steady blabber of the radio.

IV. The third woman was a nurse. She wore a white apron and white heels. The heels squealed and clung to the linoleum when she made her rounds. She heard the wail of her heels most in the silence of the third ward, but she thought that sometimes they squealed more against the wetness of piss spilled from bedpan.

The nurse often woke with her arms wrapped around her shoulders, searching themselves, herself, for the sort of pressure only touch could hold. She lifted her crooked arms in the half-lit dream state of those early morning hours and beat them against the mattress, quilt, pillow until she could feel the blood begin to rush back. She sighed and grumbled, taking a degree of pleasure in the faint warmth of her own blood, of its presence within her, the validation of it as it clamored through veins and swathed her heart. Sometimes, she wrapped her fingers around her ankles, or around the fleshy mound of her hips. When she touched her own body, she was reminded of the feeling of just that. The greeting of flesh upon flesh upon flesh. On the night of her death, she was made aware of her blood once again. This time in its dampness and

stickiness. In the way it looked like rainwater against cement and how it rose—as if by imagined needles—through the sphere of her skin. Fear, she discovered, had its own stench. A smell that surrounded sinew and organ. The bodily internal space, so exposed, so hateful in the harsh light of the external, the streetlights, the outer place. It was brazen and thwarted in the mere suggestion of itself—thin pink intestines against the familiar pelt, skin, the canister of such internal things.

Swallow fear whole if it allows you. Until then, do all you can to breathe through your mouth and not through your nose. Breathe until you can no longer smell it. Breathe through your palms and through your chest. Breathe until that nausea seeps into a different space. Breathe quicker or slower, breathe in a way that you can only think of your next breath.

V. The first baby was a boy. He had hands the size of large green grapes and a scream that sounded like a cat with its tail stuck in the door. This baby was the seventh in the family, and they called him Paul, after the apostle and after his mother's dead brother. His oldest sister bathed him and changed his diaper until he could bathe and use the toilet himself.

VI. The second baby was a girl and was the first born to her mother and father. She was large and purple—she beat her fists and heels over and over again in their pink booties. The nurses wrestled her tiny, writhing fists into wool mittens so that she wouldn't scratch her brand-new, faintly sticky skin. When she became a girl and then a woman her hair grew darker and she moved to the West coast. She became a teacher, was well liked, married a boy from her high school, and never be able to have children. Sometimes she imagined that her belly was swollen when she knew it could not be. She dreamed that there was a being behind her ribs, faintly kicking and swathed in warmth. In the summer of her thirtieth year she discovered that Endometriosis is when the tissue that is supposed to line the uterus grows outside the uterus. Her

doctors told her that it may be hereditary; they didn't know yet and they are sorry. She cried in her station wagon and on her husband's white starched shirt. He left her in the winter of that same year for the fifth grade math teacher.

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The mother was dissatisfied the next day. Her reddish newborn wailed and the soft sort of angelic glow never spread across her daughter's face upon meeting her new brother in the way the mother imagined. The headlines of the Tribune read *Brutal Murder of Nurse Marks Second this Month.* She was dissatisfied that the birth of her son was marked by the garish mention of blood, of the loss of another life, an innocent one, a life that was only searching itself for some sort of imagined warmth. A few pages later she found the mention of his birth, *Baby boy born to one name and to another name December 16, 1952.*

We will name him after his father, the mother told the nurse.

It is a good name. It is name that will remind him of his father, the nurse replied.

It is a name, the father said.

We cannot call him Junior, the mother said.

The father looked at the child and then to the floral wallpaper.

The child gazed through heavy lidded eyes upon the face of a woman he knew not yet as his mother. Her lipstick was dark, and hair curled and tucked into submission. His mother was a woman attracted to beauty in the vainest of ways. She saw herself as a great beauty, a USO and poster girl. The joy of the birth of her daughter, and then her son was blemished by the feeling of the weight of her stomach, her thighs, the hollow space beneath her lower eyelids. But, her child

knew nothing of that—at least not yet. He was consumed by the carnal things babies before and babies after were concerned with— breathe, feed, shit, sleep. He existed in a realm of memories that belonged to someone else's life. His existence spooled and constructed through his mother and father his sister and doctor. His existence was too small, too microscopic to mean anything to itself. At that hour, his mouth could not speak; tongue was wrapped around mother-root, a spirit battled the weight of its own bones, sighed once and then again before it gurgled a sound of proliferation.

Fear Only Wind

The father and son were on the lake that afternoon. They traveled, to a place that seemed as immense as the sea, as wide too. The lake looked different off of Navy Pier than it did in the silent place they visited. Cast against the crowds and the shadow of Chicago, the son thought the lake appeared smaller, as if there must be an edge in sight. It appeared tarnished by the presence of the hordes of people that dropped trash, food, their baby's binkies into the gently lapping surface. Here, away from the crowds, it was quiet and the father was content to slowly topple into the sand. He laid on his back and stared into the seamless grey sky. Once his back became sore, he slowly uncurled and sat with his spine slightly slumped—blue eyes tracing the fissure of sky and water. His son paced between the brief waves, his bare feet pale and quick over the pebbles.

Is there anything in the lake? the boy asked his father.

What kind of anything? the father replied.

Big fish, monsters, the boy said.

There could be, the father said, we don't know much about the ocean, lakes either.

So there are monsters? the boy asked.

Anything is possible, the father said.

After this exchange, the boy was careful only to wade up to his knees, close enough to dart back to the shore in a few short seconds.

The sand was slightly damp beneath the surface. It contained a gritty coolness that lasted for as long as the boy kept his feet immersed within it. Below the surface, the sand was firm and no longer microscopically flaky. The child sank his feet in the hot grains on the surface until he began to feel the vague sensation of burning.

There was no clock at the lake to tell the boy how many minutes or hours had passed, no alarm clock on the bedside table like at home. So, he stared at the lake and imagined a clock resting on the surface. He waited for fifteen minutes, watched the second hand buzz around the circle. The minute hand was slower; the hour hand moved more gradually than the one before.

Here, he thought, here was the best way to measure time. It is the only way I will tell time from now on. Time, now, bends to my making. If I am the clockmaker the clock will move the way I tell it to. The boy liked this idea; he liked it because now there would be a clock wherever he went. He would never be late again, and never be early. It was a way to know a moment before the actual moment came. The child would be able to predict when the clock clicked to five AM and then could brace himself for the squeal of the backdoor, for the smell of cigarette smoke to waft up to his bedroom window. Those sorts of private moments may become less private, the times that his parents lived in their individual moments.

But now he was on the lake and his father bent before him. He saw the thinness of his father's scalp and the ribbons of leathery skin circling his neck.

The son was a child but did not know that. He only knew himself in the strangeness of his own perceived maturity. His scope and length of days and years stretched beyond the number his parents allotted him. But when his father buried his feet, all the boy could do was laugh.

Is this where you want to be planted? the father asked.

He gestured to the spot of sand directly in front of the boy.

The son nodded and watched his roots begin to grow. Their inaugural growth began at the tip of each toe. The sprouts started beneath each toenail but not in a prying red-hot pain way. Each root was born as a translucent, wriggling sprout. Their smallness almost reflected the sand beneath, above and beside them. As they seeped further into the sand they branched out and divided. As they matured, the roots became coarse and flecked with those strange hair-like protrusions the son remembered seeing on the end of an upturned daisy.

Plant you up to your knees this time, the father said.

My roots, the son replied.

Yes, the father said, I've planted you. You're a plant.

I'm a plant, the boy repeated.

It took longer for his knee-roots to grow and the son realized that his toes were the perfect sprout for his lower roots. As the roots rippled out of his kneecaps the son felt a dull pressure just below the surface. Not exactly pain in its most obvious form, but the sort of pressure that came unwanted and forced him to lean away from the dwindling ache.

Got to water you again, the father said.

The boy wished his father would water his roots with real water.

Glug, glug, glug, the father said and pantomimed pouring a watering can.

The boy pretended the sand was cooling with each glug, but it wasn't.

It came more rapidly, the roots and sprouts and bubbled and tumbled over one another. The son felt them beneath the surface. His father did not know why but once again the child giggled insatiably. He laughed and the roots clamored towards the rich soil beneath the sand. The things that plants need to grow—each microcosm of nutrition and bacteria would be hungrily consumed and the boy thought of an ant farm. Those little beings must be in the earth too; they tunneled around his roots, fed off of them. He wasn't sure, but he thought that he felt them tickling his deepest roots. Their tiny bodies the size of needle points. Needles. He shuddered.

Here's a stick in case we forget where we planted you, the father said.

Please don't forget, the boy replied.

I'm only joking, he said.

Don't forget, the boy repeated himself.

They had played this game before, but the roots had never grown before. It was a childish game, but still a habit each time they visited the lake. The father jabbed a thin stick into the sand between the boy's left and right foot-roots. Wrinkled hands patted the sand, then reached over themselves to smooth it. One, two, three, four times the hands circled around his knee-roots. The father didn't seem to notice the roots. But perhaps he knew they were there and that they had been growing the whole time. His father must know, the boy thought. He must have just forgotten to tell the boy that this time he was planting him deep in the sand to face the swollen belly of Lake Michigan until he toppled over, or began to sprout arm-branches, or both. A line of sticks grew in the space circling his knee-roots. Some of the sticks were small and wriggled

forward and back in the lake wind. The others were more craterous and belonged to the forest. The father gave the sand one last pat and stood.

We'll never lose you now, he laughed.

The boy grimaced.

The father twisted a straw wrapper around one of the twigs.

See, he said, a flag to mark where you are.

It's not big enough, the boy said.

The father's hands were flecked with innumerable grains and he rubbed his palms against the tan softness of his corduroys. The mother noticed this some days later. She sighed to herself, sighed at the messiness of the sand and the dampness of the shoes. Those were things that should not be in the home; they should have stayed at the lake, in the place where things like that grow and fester in their collective mess.

The boy's roots were fully sunk and he could only barely wriggle his toe-roots—still iridescent and skinny. Bent at the waist he skimmed the surface with his own fingers, first trailing the circular divots created by his father, eventually going deeper. The sand shifted against the skin on the outer layer of the roots—those tremulous beings. And he felt the weight of their presence along his fingertips. Only a thin layer of sand stretched across the knee roots and the boy waited before sweeping the last bit away.

What if, he thought, the sun burned the roots, bleached them, took all the moisture they had collected? Roots can shrivel and dry and mold like the forgotten carrots in the vegetable drawer of the icebox. His mother cried for days and his father wiped the smell and the ooze of their dark growths into the trash bin. The next day they bought a new icebox—one with a silver handle and deep freezer section. If you freeze it, his mother said, it can't go bad.

So the son left his roots below the surface. He didn't dig deep enough the see them, to touch their strangeness. In his digging all he could see was the start of his kneecap—the eventual rise and the thickness of bone.

This is how a kneecap should look, he said to himself.

And,

This is how it *must* look, he thought.

The next time he looked up his father was gone. He searched the handful of people along the shore for the familiar, wiry form. He saw a fat woman in a sun hat trudging with three children in matching gingham dresses. One looked at him—a girl with short hair and rolls of flesh along her forearms. The boy waved. The girl looked away. He thought another man was his father for a moment. But the man was slouched in a way he had never seen his father slouch. The boy thought he should leave that place. He should find a way back to the car, to the bungalow, to his mother and sister and an east-facing kitchen. But, the roots were sunk and always would be; their heaviness and the weight of the sand above them would become all the boy knew of touch. And in that sort of brimming, bubbling panic he thought that he should scream, or wail or both. But all he could do was giggle and look at the sky.

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Beautiful, the mother said.

The sister smiled and pulled the hem of her dress.

You are so beautiful, the mother said again.

The mother stood in the kitchen, hand absentmindedly skimming across the countertop. The counters were bare and tan—the sort of fake marbling that would be torn out thirty or forty

years later. The kitchen was without clutter, besides the yellow radio, the plastic telephone, the crystal ashtray. Curtains were lace and wide. Bamboo shades pulled halfway, the obtrusive late afternoon sun trickled through only stray fissures. She thought that this was how things should be, that clutter should be tucked away someplace else. Her children too, should be without clutter; there should be no chocolate slickened fingertips, no sickness, no tears. Her hand trailed from the countertop to the head of her daughter. Her straight hair, that fought to be mousy and coarse had been manipulated into curls trailing along her neckline—above her forehead, across the back of her skull. The mother's fingers lingered there for a moment, a second, a minute—the gentle spool of curls, the soft crunch of hairspray and startling harshness of a hair clip shaped like a dog. The mother loved her daughter in this moment; she loved the neatness of her primped and prodded childish beauty. She felt a tenderness towards the stark whiteness of her shirt and the pleats in her skirt. The mother had fallen in love with order, time and time again—her own neck lined with pearls, a fitted checkered dress fell at the perfect length. Her lips were stained a deep red, a tone that appeared almost black in photos—her teeth glimmering in an eerily iridescent glow behind them.

She and her daughter were alone in the house. Sound was present only in the absent-minded hum of the radio and the clamor of cicadas. It was September and the cicadas knew the winter was approaching. Their hum was incessant— collective sound, deafening. The woman had lived her life here, in the Midwest, in the suburbs that wove their way farther and farther from Lake Michigan. Each summer she heard their constant whirring as if for the first time. In the winter she forgot their presence entirely. But each spring when they began to stir the mother stood on the concrete slab in the backyard and listened to their collective hum, their perforation of the stillness, and felt the gradual heating of the earth. Their sound belonged to the air and to

the warm earth. She watched the brick clad garage, white fence, brick bungalow adjacent to theirs and waited for the stirring of microscopic wings, for the fluttering of the insects and the confirmation of their own existence.

The family often divided into halves, perhaps unintentionally. Sometimes the mother imagined that her daughter was the child of a different man. When she saw her husband and daughter in the same room with one another, alone (it didn't happen often) they seemed like strangers. A pair of beings who knew nothing of their separate selves. It seemed like they met each other in the waiting room of a hair salon or in a dusty garage waiting for their oil to be changed. They shared an amiable smile or pointed out an untied shoelace, a dollar bill dropped onto the sidewalk, or the vague pleasantries of holding a door open. She was not sure if they recognized the distance or if they only knew that soft passivity. Perhaps, they were as close as a man and his daughter could be. She should be glad she thought—glad that there wasn't more, that there was nothing but a sort of stagnant detachment.

The father and son shared a strange distance, an otherness from the mother. The father was a man of stillness. Always content to wait in bus stations, train stations, airports and watch the blur of people weave around him in their own individual fervor. He was shell-shocked from the war. The same war where the mother, in the USO, spun across stages and pressed red lipstick onto her lips in mounds. The son thought of his father as a wiry form cast against the lightness of dawn or dusk—immobile and also fleeting. He remembered his father in many days and moments that accumulated as time passed. He remembered a time before memory coated its silvery sheen over what he thought he knew and what he may *really* know, and what he probably didn't know.

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The mother and daughter traveled in the mother's sky blue Buick to meet the father and son on the lake. The mother told them that,

Winter is coming. We should picnic on the lake before it turns to ice.

We could ice skate on the lake, the sister said.

You can't ice skate on the lake, the boy replied.

I don't care, she said.

The boy shrugged and looked in the general direction of the mother.

Before the ice and snow, the mother said, you don't want to go to the lake in the winter.

I do, said the boy.

No you don't, the father said from the corner.

I want to ice skate, said the sister.

We'll go to the rink, her mother replied.

The mother packed a basket of sandwiches, ham and cheese, pork tenderloin, and carrot cake for dessert. The pork tenderloin was for the father; it was the only thing he had wanted to eat for months. She spent her time breading the pork each night—one for lunch, one for dinner. The dinner pork was served without a roll, lunch was, and with a slathering of mustard on both sides. She watched the father eat pork every night without fail—the precise repetition of the knife and fork, cut, scoop, salt, ingest, repeat.

The basket was heavy and thudded against the side of her thigh as she trudged through the sand. She paused and transferred the basket from one hand to the other, pausing to rub the angry red divots in her palms. The basket was heavier than she expected when packing it. The

daughter scampered ahead, patent leather penny loafers in one hand, a glass bottle of pop in the other. They came to the lake only occasionally. But, when they did, they always came to the same spot, parked in the same parking lot and walked along the same path. When the path opened to the lake it contained a stillness not often associated with such a mass of water. Each time the mother saw the lake she thought of the Pacific and her yearly trips to Malibu. She tried to replicate the swell of the sea, the constant, unrelenting sound of the waves. Here, the waves were more of a damp sploosh, no crash or roll back into themselves. They seemed tired almost. Their first time on the lake, the father told her,

Up north, in Michigan, on Lake Superior there are many waves.

She didn't believe him. These landlocked bodies could not contain the same writhing motion of the Pacific coast. She definitely didn't believe him when he said that,

I swam in that lake once or twice. The water was only thirty-nine degrees and I thought I would freeze but I didn't.

I'm surprised you didn't, she replied.

Your body can adapt to more than you think, he said.

The mother and daughter threaded their way along the short stretch of public beach. They passed the fat woman, her three children in matching dresses and the mother shuddered to herself. She pressed her palm again her belly, pushed the slight roundness away. They walked farther than usual trying to find the father and son. She thought that they must have walked too far, that maybe the father and son had returned home. The coast curved in a way that seemed unfamiliar and the daughter trailed behind, slowly mumbling to herself. The basket creases in her palm were purple, and slightly numb. The mother thought that she should have left the heavy flatware, and the glass bottles of pop at home. As the sun shrank into the crease between sky and

lake the mother thought they should leave. She felt an annoyance towards her husband; he had sabotaged their picnic, ruined the last day of warmth. The girl whimpered behind her, blisters in her heels and curls slightly deflated onto her head.

The darkness was unnerving and the waves seemed louder as the night became full. The waves seemed to be in her skull, beating into themselves and into the thickness of her bone. She looked down and noticed the distance between her hands and her vision. Strangely and suddenly, the mother was not being able to see them, the hands, the feet, the body before her. The darkness was whole—a unified body, a mass rarely severed by flashlight or by human. They slipped down mounds of sand, all the time imagining the darkness and silhouettes of driftwood as dogs and human bodies and plastic bags full of white eggs.

Breathe in and breathe out again. Let the it rise and fall between the sound of each wave; the mother thought to herself, breathe the anxiety away. She practiced a deep breathing exercise she had read about in a magazine.

Her own personal geography had been reduced to the uncertainty of each footfall. The ever-present paranoia of a toppling mound of damp sand forced her to walk slower. Somewhere, out of the darkness (they almost walked past him) the father emerged.

In the stillness and necessary paranoia of the dark he was almost unrecognizable until the mother really looked. He stood still, eyes facing the pale glow of the water, lake water skimming just below his knee. She walked to him in fear. Afraid of what may come, of his strangeness and the image of him encompassed by the mass of dark. He turned to her, eyes looking behind her, looking at the silhouette of the daughter.

Is that him? he said.

Is that who? she asked.

The boy. I can't find the boy.

Where would he be? she said, panic rising.

That's the problem, the man replied.

I'm here, the daughter said from somewhere in the darkness behind the mother.

The daughter thought of something she learned in school the week before. Her teacher taught her that only one out of one thousand sea turtle eggs, babies, hatchlings will survive to adulthood. When they are born they clamor over one another toward the moon, toward whatever presence of light their infant minds are drawn to. Their bodies move in a teaming, writhing mass forward into the waves. On a moonless night, their only inclination are the white caps, or the thin trails of foam against the sand. As adults they retreat from that light and fear it as it belongs to a flashlight and to a man. If the animal reaches maturity, and if she is female, she will return to the same beach she was born on to lay her nest. Her brain contained the same magnetic force that drives birds to migrate and to return to the same trash-ridden lake year after year. She follows the currents, travels the ocean until the magnetic draw within her skull spins her, and returns her to a beach, familiar or unfamiliar to lay her own nest. If she is lucky, one of her eggs will evade the cruelty of man and poachers, of crabs and sharks and will find its way back to this beach. It is unlikely, she thought, but it could happen if the turtle was there.

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In the quiet of the night the family walked the beach in a stiff line, each quietly called his name, too scared to wail or cry out. They thought that maybe, if it stayed quiet he would be found sooner. If they kept it in the family. If they didn't call attention to themselves, he would come wandering out with melted chocolate in his palm, or ice cream running along his lips

wiping the tiredness of an accidental nap out of his eyes. The mother felt the blisters between the two toes on her left foot begin to bubble and the daughter whimpered until they found him.

Huddled in the disintegrating mess of an old, wooden hull the boy rocked from heel to toe, again and again and again. The panic lifted without acknowledgment in a way that felt chilly and abrupt at the same time. His palms were sticky to the touch and cheeks were, too—one side with blood and the other with tears. And in the faint illumination of the moon the father could see a slender, protruding splinter. A portion of the hull lodged itself in the boy's knee just below the kneecap. His whimpers were louder then and even though the son lodged his fingernails into the father's forearms all he could see in that darkness was the white of the wood.

Where were you? the father asked his son and clutched his shoulders.

You planted me, the boy said, I couldn't move.

You left, the father replied.

What did you do? the mother asked the father.

The sister started to cry and the father wrenched the splinter out of the boy's knee before he had time to notice.

By Anxious Melancholy

Each morning the boy walked three blocks east and two west. Each of the brick bungalows along the street was distinguishable only by the color of the metal shades that hung over their front doors. Red was the color of the fall and of rust. It was also a color that reminded the boy of a jigsaw puzzle of a Mustang convertible. The mother thought that red with white piping was the color that best complimented the brick. She told her gardening society that she read that once in a magazine. The other housewives thought of their own metal shades—blue, yellow, green and looked at one another.

That year the mother had a personal crisis and flew back to Los Angeles for two months. She sat on the beach in Malibu and remembered that they do not have metal shades in California like they do in the Midwest. She watched herself evaporate into the sand and forgot for a moment that her belly had ever swelled with children, and that those children now were taller than her and communicated in distance. She forgot the husband who moved his grill into the garage and instead of using the stove, grilled each meal, secretly hoping that the fumes of the

grill would envelope him whole. This was the stuff of desire, but mostly desire that had no name, no sound that could permeate the silence—it existed only in these private moments of separation.

That year the boy flattened his hair to his head and noticed the weight of his own body—the length of it, the width too. It was not a body that could be held with one hand, but two.

Anxiety was another weight that the boy came to recognize. It smelled of fire and rain and felt like a car on a steep decline, turn after turn bent the headlights in whirring succession. The boy sometimes, felt his stomach lurch like the moment before the breaks kicked in and there was a dull sort of air that passed between the pedal and the slightly soggy carpeted floor. The father's Buick was a place to imagine the accident, the brakes failing, the screech, the cinematic contorted hunk of metal. He had never been in a car accident, but imagined one each time they drove. Every day it seemed the boy heard noise louder and louder: the sound of dishes clattering and conversations in quiet ebb over one another and the hum of the refrigerator and the sound of the train before it arrived in the station and before the doors opened and the sound of the rain that must be turning to ice soon, and the boy dreamed that he was a heart attack victim at eighteen and woke only to the sound of a golden retriever pawing the outside of his attic bedroom door.

Every summer the boy and his father drove the few long hours to Ontario. Each took a few hours at the wheel of the Buick, wound their way through the mostly empty highways through northern Michigan—billboard skeletons and truck stops obtrusive to the untamed flatness of the earth. The boy remembered many highways, certain plastic crosses and flowers, the same gas station the father stopped at each time they made the trip.

There was an old man at the gas station, an old woman too, and a toddler who ran naked in the summer months. The child had hair that was almost translucent and paper thin. Most of the time, the child sat inside the two-aisle gas station with his grandmother. He waved to the boy

when he bought pop or chips or both. The gaze of the toddler made the boy uneasy. He was unsure how to reciprocate the grape-jelly encrusted toddler's screeching proliferations and wild, clawing hands that reached towards his own. So he smiled. This, the boy had learned, was the way to escape the moments when he wanted to disintegrate into the laminate flooring. He smiled, laughed in a good-natured-polite-laugh and looked away, never into the eyes of the source. The source was what drove the boy into these strange internal spaces. It was why his bones slowly crumbled inside him, he decided. And once he slammed the door of the sky-blue Buick behind him, he felt a strange closeness to his father, a calm at the sight of the receding buildings. Replaced what was anxiety before the stop and the dirty fingernails of the toddler with a stillness.

The boy turned to his father and held a can of Coke between them.

Want a sip? he asked.

I only drink Dr. Pepper, the father replied.

This was true, the icebox in the garage was always stocked full.

I'll have some anyway, the father said some moments later.

The boy passed the can to him.

See, the father said, not as good, not nearly as good.

I'll get a Dr. Pepper next time, the boy replied.

When they reached the familiar desolation of the forest the boy watched his father retreat into comfortable silence. His actions became fluid and without a sense of predetermination. Here, the boy thought, the man, his father, allowed something, a wall maybe, to crumple.

They fished most days, caught trout and walleye, sometimes bass. In the mornings, the father, who carried his rifle strapped to his back between his sleeping roll and backpack faded

into the density of the tree line and returned with fowl or, sometimes venison. The son had never seen his father kill—not besides the fish, that the son couldn't even manage to kill. Each time the boy handed the wriggling toughness to his father a feeling of disappointment stretched between them. But, the boy had imagined the feeling of hatchet against bone against rock thousands of times, and could not force his palms to shape in that way, to carry the necessary force that left the green scaled body to sputter in slower flops. The boy skinned and gutted the fish and vomited into the ferns. But, time and time again the father tossed the bleary-eyed fish to him in a pathetic toss. And he prepared to lose the fish he ate that morning to a damp pile amid ants and moss on the forest floor. The boy fell asleep quickly the first night, limbs tired and thirsting for sleep.

*

Sometime between sunset and sunrise the boy woke and felt the presence of his father's sleeping body next to him. A voice that existed somewhere inside said to him,

You have a sore on the inside of your mouth. A sore on the lower right side if you are facing yourself, on the left side if you're not. You think that it must be red on the outside and slightly pink on the inside—you are not sure of this; you are not sure of many things. But this is how you think it must be.

Climb inside now. Imagine yourself inside the sore. You are a child maybe, or a woman. A woman who is too round around the middle and in too red in the face. Maybe there is a slight bulge on the lower side of one of the sides of your mouth. This is where the sore must be. Climb around within it; it will be soft and shiny. Maybe somehow better than the rest of the mouth, it is less toothy and stiff. It is a part of you that should not be open, and there it becomes unfamiliar.

You are the one who assumes each sore, each blemish and misgiving to be something deadly. Now you will imagine yourself without lips, or a cheek or with one of those sterile and artificial tubes that come out of your throat like the old women on commercials who have been pack-a-day-chain-smokers-for-their-entire-lives-going-on-forty-years-now. But remember that there are also old women with hair crisp and curled artificially (maybe it's a wig?) who have smoked the same amount of cigarettes, or maybe ten or maybe 100 more who now bake cookies and outlive their vegan, clean-eating New Age daughters. But you, you think, must be the other. You will die at twenty-five or some other round, easy age. They will mourn you, and you will notice the weight that your skeleton and muscles hold.

*

The voice and the dream remained in the boy's skull for the rest of the day. There was something peculiar about it. Usually dreams didn't stick with him. But, that one did.

That day, out of radio communication and the closest ranger station farther than they could walk—the father and his son prepared for the astronauts to land on the moon for the first time. They would not know for another week if Neil Armstrong and his crew had made it. The father and son laid with their backs against the faint rigidity of their sleeping bags and allowed their eyes to roam the indistinguishable mass of the stars and sky. The moon appeared so delicately craterous, as if the pale luminescence of its orb was only a centimeter from their upturned faces, instead of 239,900 miles (the boy had checked) and time they knew nothing of away.

They will make it, the boy said to his father.

And the father said that,

Men were not supposed to set their feet on a place like that.

Why? the boy asked.

Some things are better left unknown. It isn't right to know everything, the father said.

They wouldn't know everything, the boy contested.

They would know more than we do, his father said.

We don't need to know everything, the boy said.

That's what I'm saying, the father replied.

The boy fell silent.

In pink living rooms and wood-panel clad recreation rooms humans crowded around the dim flicker of their televisions. They watched the grainy outline of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin in straining interest as they twisted the faintly rippling flag into the surface of the moon. Each heard Neil Armstrong say the words that would be scrawled across elementary school blackboards for the next year. They said that it felt like hope. Something better than the *now,* better than the monotony of the suburbs or the heat of the city. The boy wouldn't see the landing until he was a man in fading corduroys facing a television in which the landing became a crude transition from the crispness of the Bears game, the news, of the sitcoms of that later time. He remembered that he had been in Ontario when they landed; he remembered his father and thought of the wilderness in a way he hadn't in years. He would remember falling asleep that night in that dense darkness he had slept in each night prior. He also remembered the girl.

*

The voice returned to the boy immediately that night.

You should rise now, it said.

Listen—the night is not too dark to see. Walk until you see the house, keep going, it will be obvious when you are there. It will not be where you think it should be, but it will be there, eventually.

Arrive at the dilapidated maybe yellow maybe white farmhouse and breathe a sigh of relief. You will give the first voice a warm beer an hour or maybe more later. The voice will be grateful. A gratitude that smells like grape. Fake grape, nauseating fake grape, that sticky purple kind. All it wanted was the skunky, faintly saliva caressed beer-bottle. Drink it now, you say. But they don't. There is something that tells you that you shouldn't, wouldn't waste it the way the voice is. Drink it quick, open your throat and let your vision separate.

There will be a group of figures milling around the fire. They sort of blend into one another in the heat. You never really expect fire to be as hot as it really is. Imagine all the old-timey images of a bearded man and his grandson sprawled before the glow, or angelic children on Christmas Eve. They stay—faces aglow for days, or years or until their papery selves are tossed into the trash.

You stand inside. Back is pressed against drywall. The party is teetering around you. In one corner a girl is coated in blue something. Blue glitter, you think, or soap, or something else that has poured itself over her. She is slumped against the wall in the same way you are. Your eyes touch for a moment, and hold onto one another. It is not common for them to grasp in this way. She waves. You wave back. You notice her sit beside you, slowly and then all at once the presence of her *self* and of the body that it contains. Her blue is rubbing off on you. It must be. How could the illumination of the sea, or rather, the way a light in a suburban pool in the depth

of the night not slip onto you somehow? She must be a girl, or a woman, or another creature of that sort. Her blue is slipping —you know this without looking and you ask,

Why are you blue?

I'm not blue.

I can see you're blue.

No, I'm perfectly fine. I think I'm happy, too.

No, I am absolutely positive that you are blue.

I mean this. (Peel some blue off her forearm)

That is not blue.

(That is not blue) She says again and again and turns her index and thumb finger towards you. She flicks the blue onto your forearm now. It exposes each, individual hair, how they lengthen in some places and how they come together, clump and then spread apart once again. You will remember once when you shaved your arm hair.

The father had received a razor in the mail, or from the mall, or from Macy's, or from the mother. The razor was silver and gold—it promised the *closest shave you'll ever get!* And he left it in the stubborn wooden drawer along the shelves in the bathroom. To open the drawer, you had to first wriggle one side, then the other side, then the first side again. Eventually it would slide out with an abrupt sort of fluidity. There was a frog that lived on top of the drawer, on top of the shelf, on the green of that strange little table. The frog was also green, but a sickly sort of yellow that was almost white on its underbelly. You don't remember or know how it ate, or what it ate or where it had come from. But each time that you teetered into the bathroom and sat on the toilet across from the frog it would look at you with eyes that never blinked. Sometimes, you thought, it must smile. But now, you know none of these things to be true. Not even shaving your

arms. Not even washing the downy, childish hair down the sink drain. Not even running your fingers along the porcelain basin to brush each lingering stray end down and away. You fastened a chunk of toilet paper to the top of the promotional razor and rubbed both ways, so that each hair was gone before delicately pressing the plastic razor protector over the head of the blade.

You will turn to the girl to your left and say,

See, now I am blue like you.

I told you that I am happy.

No, this blue. (Gesture to her skin, her hair.)

She will smile nervously now.

That is not blue.

It is blue.

Drink the beer and watch her leave you. Feel the pain of the drywall against knobby backbone stronger now. Eat mandarin oranges out of the syrup and wish for another beer and the feeling of the liquid softened with saliva to slurp down your throat. Fear blood being drawn and the sensation of falling before you are asleep.

*

The boy woke in the sort of stupor that comes with sleeping for twelve or thirteen hours. He felt the faint crustiness of sleep-saliva coating one of his cheeks. It was comforting in a strange way—comforting in that the boy didn't think he could fall into a deep enough sleep that created saliva dribbling.

When he was an older man he remembered the strange nights of the waking dream and the girl drenched in blue. He questioned the authenticity of the dream, or his wakeful state in them. Still, that dream lingered with him in a way that none of his other dreams would. Perhaps it remained because of the *realness* of it, or simply because it existed only in the moment of its birth and then immediate death. He never remembered the dream fully, but always knew it was there. For one reason or another, the boy always thought of the dream and the blue girl in the moments before he fell asleep in a sort of wishful hope that he may see her again.

The morning after the dream was marked by the headlines worldwide—the success of the moon landing and a false sense of closeness knit into the suburbs and between dilapidated families. Walter Cronkite directed how to take a photo of the television screen to perfectly capture an image of the men standing on the surface of the moon for the first time. The boy's sister had knelt—knee against thick shag carpet and positioned her Brownie Camera. She watched the landing through the viewfinder and printed the photos a week later—black and white and lined with a jagged edge that would one day become a caricature for old photographs. The mother pressed the photo into a red fake-leather photo album—her fingernail the same size as the dwarfed and grainy image of Neil Armstrong. The father and son knew nothing of the headlines. They knew, that the headlines existed but didn't know if they would be riddled with tragedy or of joy.

The boy remained fixed with the idea that the men had made it, that the moon was habitable and that they had come in contact with another species of humans or human-like beings. He never thought they would be green and only have one eye or tentacles for arms like a cartoon. The caricature was too easy. Instead, he thought, they looked something like the blue girl—had eyes that seemed perpetually moist and smelled of a familiar yet strange smell. Maybe

even, the astronauts fell in love—at least with the idea and the otherness of the beings on the moon. Their skin dusted in stardust and limbs strong from racing across the craterous terrain. The boy knew he was too old for such fantasies and dreams. Each time he let his mind tumble over the idea—he felt a personal embarrassment that he indulged in these thoughts. The father maintained that,

Some things humans shouldn't know.

And the boy asked,

Do you think they met anything there?

Anything? the father repeated.

Other people, the boy said.

I think if they did, they wouldn't be people, the father replied.

What would they be? the boy asked.

Nothing that anyone has ever seen before, he said.

The father then retreated into the lush underbelly of the forest, rifle stiff and inorganic against the constant movement of the branches, ferns, man. The son followed his father at a short distance—the waves of deep sleep and the memory of the girl intoxicated his footfalls and forced them to weave over one another. He wasn't sure if the father knew he was there or not. It probably didn't matter either way—he wouldn't have handed him the rifle or taught him to shoot. He knew the boy would never do it. Their arrival felt brief, but the boy was unsure of time and how it was moving that day. His head felt sticky and heaped with sand, an oozing weight.

The creatures in this forest had not learned to fear man in the way that the animals closer to the suburbs or towns had. They watched the father and the boy behind him with a gentle curiosity that was untainted with immediate fear. So, when the father leveled the rifle and shot

the doe between her eyes her neck was stretching towards him, reaching towards that strange two -legged creature who smelled of soap and flesh. Her inertia was cut and instead of leaning forward, her body slumped downward. The son had imagined there would be more panic, blood and fear in death. But he was wrong. The other deer on the far end of the field startled at the noise and bounded forward. They only raised their sloped brows for a moment before abandoning the sweet sustenance of the rain dampened grass. The father moved mechanically in the moments after her death—waited a moment to allow *her* to decompress against the earth before cutting into the warmth of her internal spaces. The son was still unsure if the father knew he was there—he remained in the faint shadows of the tree line. The father probably thought his son was too afraid to follow, but still, he was there. He watched the mechanical rise and fall of his father's arms. His father seemed comfortable in his closeness to death, to killing. The distance that stretched between him and his hands, and the ability his hands contained seemed comforting now. The father never spoke of the war but the son could imagine him there—silent and tactile—allowing his body to exist within and obey the commands needed for his survival. Silent dutiful motions had propelled him forward. The mind perhaps had done that, tucked behind layers of compacted silvery membrane.

The boy remembered the slope of his father’s back and the faint dampness of sweat against the curve of his backbone. Memory fastened and conjured the taste of burnt venison and the slight taste of blood each time the boy smelled barbeque or bit into a steak. And after the father left the field—startling the incessant clamor of birds, the boy slowly walked to her. He remembered closing one of his eyes and squinting the other. He allowed the open cavity of her body to become a blur distinguishable only by the grainy color of one thing or another. The soft orb of her eyes still appeared as if alive—oddly familiar too, similar to the strange feeling of

deja-vu in a foreign place. Her eyes appeared to look forward, straining towards the tree line, the river perhaps or towards the next gulp of grass.

In a pink tinged swimming pool some number of years later the boy leaned onto the concrete deck. Feeling the warmth on his bare stomach he looked upward and into the face of a girl in blue sunglasses. She tipped the glasses down her nose and stared into his eyes before his hands fastened around her ankle. She laughed at the welcomed coolness of his palms.

She told him that his eyes looked almost,

The same color of the pool.

And he told her,

That her eyes looked like the eyes of a doe.

And then he remembered for the first time in years.

Tell me to call my father before we go to the bar, he told her.

But they forgot until it was too late to call and the boy took a shot of vodka out of a glass shaped like a cactus wearing a sombrero.

In Tennessee, Waltzing

The man had a friend named Texas. Texas was a man who looked similar to the man. He had a square face, a mustache coated thinly in wax and wore dark aviators at almost every hour of the day. He guffawed at the wrong times, and the right times. His voice carried the dark raspiness of his suburban Illinois home—blinds shut at noon, ashtrays in each room—bathroom, kitchen, bedroom, hallway. His wife, who he called Jingle Bells, was a round woman with skin the shade of a boiled lobster.

It couldn't be helped, she said to herself when she looked in the mirror.

And

This was just how things were.

Most weekends, Texas and Jingle Bells huddled in the lap of Lake Michigan, shielded only by the soaring metal grandstands of Soldier Field. The wind, the icy air, and sometimes the ice itself penetrated the stands no matter the layers of wool scarves and mittens, the handmade quilts moist with spilled whisky. The cold was always there.

After the games, Jingle Bells lathered her round cheekbones with Vaseline. She woke those mornings, still drunk with her hair glued in ridges across the arch of her cheeks and stuck in her mouth and eyes. Warm water helped soften the cream. More Crown Royal would, too.

Just enough to take the edge off, Texas said.

She nodded slowly as a reply while the Vaseline split in divots across her angry flesh.

You'll be alright, he said.

And he was right, she told herself, the pain never lasted too long.

See, you're all right, he told her.

It must be true.

At the field they sat in the seats the wife's family had had for generations. She was proud of that. And thought of it often as she huddled with the man, Texas, their other friends in ankle-length parkas. Most of them had met in college and many of them had returned to where they had been born. Somewhere they eventually grew old in.

Their time in college, Southern Illinois between Missouri and Arkansas was speckled by a series of photographs the wife sifted through in her later years. Texas, the man and some of the others dead by then. The wife dwelled in the atmospheric presence of her youth and the alcohol induced euphoria of her college years for the rest of her life. They were all smaller then, lithe bodies and limbs encircling one another and sprawled across an olive wall-to-wall carpet.

She often told the story of her first night in college to her children, godchildren, and neighbors—anyone who listened. That night, she and some of the other freshman went to an algae-encrusted pond nestled between two brick-clade dorms. The boys were quick and threw themselves into the still, dark crust of pond water. They yelled over one another and dove, bare-assed into the six feet of murky goose-shit water. Jingle Bells, before she sank into the water,

tied a thin band of bells around her neck. She said some years later that she had been afraid that night. Afraid of the sort of night she had never seen in Chicago and afraid that she may be forgotten in the shallow depths of the pond. The bells disturbed the childish wails from the water. She thought they would lead a bare-chested boy to her rescue if she were to slip beneath the deep darkness of the surface. She heard laugher from the lake as she tossed her white cotton bra onto the gentle slope of the bank. She saw the nakedness of the other girls and felt ashamed seeing their tan lines and confident sway. Jingle Bells felt the heaviness of her underwear in the brown-tinged water and slowly let them fall to the flat, murky bottom. Pretended that like the other girls, she had been truly skinny-dipping the whole time. In an attempt to pancake-slap the water and guffaw in the same sort of childish excitement of the others she inhaled a mouthful of lake water and felt her throat strain against the bells. After that night they called her Jingle Bells, and nothing else—her name, her real name, became almost foreign to her own ears.

Texas and Jingle Bells eventually let more time stretch between Bear's games and moved to a cul-de-sac in one of suburbs that surrounded Chicago. The new house was mostly wood, not brick, and the front was painted a deep evergreen, brick pillars framed the doorway. Sprinklers swish-clicked over the grass in the summer months and their son shoveled and salted in the winter.

Texas was doing well his bosses said. He was good at his job and Jingle Bells thought that he always would be. She was content to stay home, not work, and raise their children. Texas invented flavors for companies that sold sugary food, cookies, and cereal. In his best year, he invented three more flavors than his boss. Jingle Bells was proud and liked to think that his boss was jealous of him. She never knew what the flavors tasted like, only their names. Sometimes, if the flavors made it to a new product the family tried it, without knowing Texas had invented it.

Instead of writing the new flavor on the product, the companies only wrote *New Strawberry Flavor!* Or nothing at all and hoped the customers enjoyed the subtle change in flavor. That year, Texas invented Blue Dream, Banana Sunrise, and Maple #52.

Jingle Bells was comfortable to walk their golden retriever, vacuum the tan living room, stairs, and wipe down kitchen countertops. The children went to school during the day and she packed their lunches and cleaned their clothes. In the afternoon she opened the windows in the family room and leaned deeply into the crunch of the faux-leather La-Z-Boy. There she exhaled menthol after menthol into the popcorn ceiling. One of the rules of the cul-de-sac was that they couldn't build fences that obstructed the view and greenery of the neighbor's lawns. Jingle Bells was able to see into the yards surrounding hers. She watched other housewives rub suntan lotion into their toddler's shoulders, and watched boys with grass stains on their knees tumble time and time again.

For Christmas the cul-de-sac association threw a cocktail party. At a house down the street the neighbors sipped vodka out of plastic martini glasses and talked amongst themselves. In another room, the children were content to be mesmerized by the flicker of the television; hired babysitters whispered behind them. During the Christmas party that year it snowed, slowly and then rapidly. The car tracks in the road blurred into a field of smoothness while the hedges and Christmas light tangled bushes appeared to become little old women crouched—their white cloaks pulled tight over their heads.

The Christmas party meandered into the street and into the snow—the party-goer's alcohol dampened shouts and stumbles sounded louder in the silence of the snow. Jingle Bells lit a cigarette and grasped onto Texas' arm for support as she shuffled down the three steps to the sidewalk.

I like this dress on you, he muttered.

What? she half-yelled.

I said, I like your dress, he full-yelled back.

Jingle Bells laughed and kicked the snow from the last step. She was surprised Texas ever noticed those sorts of things. As their marriage had waxed and waned into a comfortable sort of coexistence, Texas had begun to fall asleep on the couch and spent less time with his hand shoved down her blouse. It was fine, she thought, this was how things were.

She turned back to the house for a moment, and waved her cigarette hand in a general sort of flailing goodbye. In that moment the backside of her mitten came inches from the face of a man on the step above her. They both screeched louder and the man grasped her hand and shook it once, twice, three times in mock anger. She recognized him as the man who lived across the street from her. His wife worked at the department store in the center of the suburban town and wore her hair in blonde coils around her neck. He smiled and held her gaze for a moment too long.

I live in the house across the street from you. The ugly blue one, he said.

It's not ugly, she laughed.

I think it is. But we've only just moved in.

I know, she replied.

The man said his name and the two began to trudge in the direction of their separate homes, Texas a faint outline some distance ahead.

Everyone calls me Jingle Bells, she said when they reached the front of her house.

Jingle Bells, the man repeated, I like that.

Merry Christmas, she said.

Merry Christmas, Jingle Bells.

She could feel a warmth build beneath her cheeks. A smile tugged at each end of the her chill-tightened face. This man was warm and tall. She thought of him that night and each night after. Maybe it was the monotony, she told herself; anyone would become bored here. Anyone would let their thoughts stray. They were only thoughts, anyway. There was a time when Jingle Bells thought she was beautiful, and skinny. Men pursued her, wanted to talk to her and be near her. As she grew older, her skin stretched and so did her belly. She noticed these things each morning when she woke and avoided mirrors in the bathroom. She joined a swim group and did exercises in the community pool with Styrofoam weights during the summer. The kindness of the man across the street, the way he really *looked* at her was something to think about, to imagine, no matter how absurd.

In the spring the man in the blue house mulched his front garden. Jingle Bells stood outside her house, slowly brought a full glass of lemonade to her mouth again and again. She watched in mock supervision of the landscapers who mulched her front garden. She made slow circles around them and nodded in approval while they poured bag after bag of mulch. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the man slowly unroll his back and come upright; she turned then and waved the glass of lemonade in his direction. She heard his laugh and he waved a gloved hand back.

She saw the man and one of his children riding bikes around the cul-de-sac some weeks later. Her own children were walking the golden retriever around the cul-de-sac. His toddler furiously peddled his tricycle in wobbly imitation of his father. Jingle Bells watched them until she felt a wetness on her right foot. She looked down and saw she had emptied the entire jug of

water into the geranium she had been watering. The carpet was stained with potting soil in the shape of a crescent moon for years. She felt Texas watching her, but she never met his eye.

That spring was hot and sticky. Children were coated in the syrupy remnants of popsicles and housewives fainted. It was the sort of heat that was all consuming. Even with the shower turned completely to the cold side, the humidity still buzzed. The sweat came back before the shower water could be wiped away. On a Tuesday morning in the midst of the heat wave the cul-de-sac association left a pink flyer in each mailbox. The paper clung to itself and the wife saw that the ink had spread and begun to bleed. The association was having a pajama party—children and adults alike were to dress up. There was going to be a movie and popcorn, refreshments for the adults. The pajama party was going to be at the blue house across the street.

Jingle Bells tumbled up the stairs in childlike giddiness with the golden retriever bounding beside her. She opened the bottom drawer of her dresser. Pajamas lay in pink and purple mountains around her—some flannel, others cotton. Deep and pressed against the back of the drawer, there were smaller lace and silk shorts, camisoles, slips.

She watched herself in the full length mirror, felt the heaviness of her hips in the third pink, square nightgown she poured herself into. The lace encircling her neck looked stuffy, flecked with the unevenness of worn fabric. She tried to pull it back, expose the slight tan of her chest but the fabric was heavy and fell time and time again. The silk and lace sets were tight. In the afternoon light she saw the unwanted layers of fat and cellulite-ringed thighs. Her body devoured the scant amount of fabric. Jingle Bells began to cry, shrugged back on one of the pink sacks and fell asleep on the foot of the bed.

In the darkness of the west facing bedroom she stared into the faint differences of light reflected across the ridged ceiling. The standing fan sputtered in circles. Jingle Bells closed her

eyes, still slightly sticky with tears, and imagined the man in the blue house beside her. He would be warm, she thought, but gracious. He would read books and drink wine before taking the dogs for a walk. He must rub the children's backs until they fell into a deep sleep. The man in the blue house wouldn't have the abruptness of Texas, he would look at her for hours, eyes soft and clinging. Instead of sitting in front of the television until he fell asleep, this man talked to her until they fell asleep in the same bed.

The next day she stood in the harsh light of the department store dressing room—clammy palms flattened the red silk over her belly time and time again. The loudspeakers in the dressing room crackled and she heard amidst the quiet pondering of her fellow shoppers:

I was dancing with my darling to the

Tennessee Waltz

When an old friend I happened to see

I introduced her to my loved one and

While they were dancing

My friend stole my sweetheart from me

The woman watched herself and the man spin in slow circumference across a blank plane. The red silk pajamas hugged her roundness in a way that made her look filled with a deep warmth. Her lips and hair reflected the red and tinged her skin in a strange bloodiness. It was beautiful. In this, she thought, the man in the blue house may fall in love with her. Anything, she thought, was possible. This was true. Anything could happen today or tomorrow or the next day. He would toss down his plastic martini glass and realize that she was all that he had always wanted. He would leave his thin, blonde hair coiled wife. Before either of them realized it they

would be on a plane traveling to a strangely exotic destination, away from the suburbs and Chicago.

The only problem with the red silk pajamas was that the legs were too long. The pajamas were designed for a woman who was as wide as Jingle Bells, but not as short. The pant legs trailed behind her and gathered a faint dampness from the freshly watered grass. Still, they were beautiful and she was beautiful in them.

The morning of the party she baked angel food cake. The dough rose into a soft mound before she adorned the surface with whipped cream the color of her wedding dress. Each strawberry she sliced was done in practiced precision—the space between each strawberry only a centimeter wide. The cake rested in the refrigerator cloaked in a pale green plastic container. Jingle Bells checked on it between layers of makeup and jewelry changes. Imagining a sliding berry, she prodded the cake with the pointed end of a knife until it returned to its original position. When Texas came home he looked at her in the red-pajamas and laughed.

Why are you wearing pajamas at five? he asked.

She handed him the cul-de-sac flyer as a response.

What shit are they going to think of next, he laughed.

They're showing Breakfast at Tiffany's for the adults, she replied.

For the adults, he mocked.

She looked away, and bit her lower lip—hard.

And why all the makeup? You look like a goddamn loony-tune.

The Avon girl came by, she lied.

I thought I looked nice, she said, pleading for any sort of confirmation.

You know how I like you, Texas replied and descended into the den.

Jingle Bells stood between the front door and screen door for a moment before she stepped outside. Her children had already gone to the blue house. The neighborhood children had beat on their front door before she could finish her last makeup touch-up. She watched others slip through the doorway, and heard the gentle rise of voices clamor over one another in the late spring dusk. The screen door slammed behind her and Jingle Bells was outside. The cake, gripped between her ring-encrusted fingers was heavy and her sweat pooled in the cracks. She walked from her front lawn, to the pavement. As she reached the far side of the street the man opened the front door to let a group of nightgown clad partygoers in.

Jingle Bells, he shouted and waved a hand in her direction.

She stopped and then lurched forward. Her eyes bore into the upturned face of the man—a smile grew along the edges.

She tried to raise her hand in reply, but felt the weight of the angel food cake. She smiled and laughed, tried to laugh the tinkling laugh of Audrey Hepburn. He must have chosen the movie, she thought; he was a romantic, like her. Her next step collided bare toe and rounded curb. She twisted her back, holding the cake upward, sputtered in a failed attempt to catch her balance before she felt the dull sensation of concrete against backbone and a pain that spread warmly and fully through each limb. The trail of her red silk pajamas had tangled in itself and twisted her body until she fell heavily between the curb and front lawn of the blue house. The angel food cake fell scattered across the blades of grass—frosting encrusted there for weeks, strawberries nibbled by squirrels.

The wife remembered the face of the man in the blue house above her, besides her, the pressure of his hands on her shoulders as they heaved. The moisture of the air and her contorted

wails left the makeup in winding clumps and divots across her cheeks. Somewhere there was the smell of barbeque and the cicadas had begun their collective hum.

Texas brought her a new pair of pajamas to the hospital, they were light blue, flannel and worn thin in the elbows and hips. The doctors injected her spinal column, opened up the layers of skin and tried to return it to the shape it had before the curb had dislodged some of its delicate bones. Some months later the doctors realized their prying with the sinews and muscles of her backbone had rendered her to experience nothing but pain. They had made a mistake and were sorry, she could do physical therapy and file for disability. Texas sued, and Jingle Bells cried.

They won the lawsuit easily and moved to Florida. She told Texas she couldn't move back to the cul-de-sac and live through the harshness of the cold winters in Illinois. They had always wanted to move to Florida, anyway. They spent a week in Palm Beach for their honeymoon almost twenty years prior. She never returned to the cul-de-sac, preferring instead to be transported directly from the hospital to O'Hare—nurse and morphine drip in tow.

Jingle Bells collected a small fortune and laid in a blue striped bathing suit next to the glass enclosed pool. Sometimes, when the faint jolt of the car spewed ribbons of pain up her backbone she thought of the red, silk pajamas and the man in the blue house, but mostly, she wouldn't. She thought of him in a few spare moments. Mostly in anger, at herself. The fantasy she had allowed herself was the root of her chronic pain. Texas treated her with a degree of tenderness she had not felt in years; he walked behind her now, tried to carry some of her weight between his palms and offset the shock of the pain. The children sat next to her by the pool and refilled her glass with pop when she asked. The golden retriever was old and spent most days simmering in the heat of the sun—tongue heaving and eyes closed. Jingle Bells was content and allowed each day to become a quiet repetition of the one before.

She no longer thought of the man in the blue house and the embarrassment of her fall. She was grateful for that. Only once, in the moment when a mold-speckled pool-side radio whined a familiar song between liposuction commercials and the hum of static she thought of him:

I remember the night and the Tennessee Waltz

Now I know just how much I have lost

Yes, I lost my little darling the night they were playing

The beautiful Tennessee Waltz.

In the Blind

I. False Spring

One was enough, one was always enough to begin with, at least. One was the correct amount to start, for it to do anything at all. It always began with one drink, one beer, one shot. It was like straw that was kindled and burned with a false sense of urgency. But only the straw ignited—not the slightly dampened twigs or larger, seemingly impenetrable logs rich with lichen and mold. The man drank a fourth or fifth beer before the fire and the woman heaped handful of after handful of straw onto the smoldering embers.

It won't do anything, the man said.

I'm still trying, the woman replied.

The wood is too damp, he said.

The fire will warm it, she said.

Soon her cough became abrasive in the silence. It tampered with the catharsis the man imagined they would experience sprawled before the comfortable warmth. When the woman was frustrated she often threw her arms up in a sort of mock anger, exacerbation. She was afraid of

silence and shrank away from it—pressed her palm, teased by the warmth of the sun in earlier weeks into the winter-chill tightened face of the man. The proper silence, he thought, was still and heavy and noticeable. But—the woman could not allow it, would not allow it to wax and wane and grow. The silence needed to ferment for some time before it could be fully realized. Her tongue tried to outrun the fear of the quiet and of meeting his gaze.

Sometimes, she thought that this man was not the proper sort of man. He held glass doors open for her and paid for their beers, but there was something wedged between them. She couldn't name it, but it felt like the beginning of fear, the faint roll of the stomach and the tightness nestled behind earlobes and sweat between fingers.

They had been traveling for three days and her ass had become sore from sitting in the thinly clad passenger seat day in and day out. The man smoked menthols and taped first his right, then left index finger against the steering wheel. On the third day the woman said,

Doesn't it feel like we've been traveling for ten days?

Maybe we have been, the man said.

He then smiled and looked at her through aviator sunglasses—black and impenetrable and the woman smiled back. He laughed to himself and of thought how the woman had always exaggerated time. Her time passed in centuries and miles instead of seconds and feet. Time became suspended and tripped over itself in the modified light of the Lusty Sombrero Motel where they spent the third night.

She told her mother they were headed to California and some number of months later, after the breakup, the man would deny all such claims. He said instead they didn't know where they were going but it looked like Ohio or Pennsylvania, flat and slightly cold. There was no plan for where they we going; never mind the future, their future.

Their silence was often clear and faint as the thin mist of the early morning hours—other times it was amber and liquid and hot. It learned to harmonize with the accidental sneeze and rupture of it in a way that would forgive and forget that it was even broken to begin with.

Each morning the woman turned to the man and said,

How much longer?

This much longer, he said and held his fingers a foot apart.

Bullshit, she said and they both laughed.

They drank beer each night, sometimes hard liquor too—in those moments silence would be forgotten as an artifact of the day and instead they would laugh and shriek in artificial merriment. And at a truck stop sunrise in pseudo irony but all the time serious the man told the woman that,

You must remember to forget me.

She punched his right shoulder and shook her hand in mock pain.

After all, the man thought, she was a woman he only happened to know. She liked to smoke cigarettes like him in the daydream of neon and moonlight at a southbound rest stop. She was quiet when he begged her to be. She liked whiskey and Mexican beer and her mouth tasted of peppermint.

At that same truck stop she stretched her arms as far as they would go—collarbone stretched against flesh and said,

We must keep going

(She gestures and stretches her arms out again.)

this far.

They were still drunk and laughed as a semi accelerated and spewed loose dirt and dust into the night air. The earth was chalky and red. The woman leaned, both hands pressed firmly into the man's shoulders and coughed mid-laugh. The man looked at her and asked,

Can you imagine the rain here?

I can't, but I can imagine the wind, she replied.

II. Notes for What Life is Possible

Between the sound of screeches, wails and the tick-tick-ticking of footsteps across polished linoleum two babies were born on a sticky July night. One baby had been born in forty-five minutes and the nurse asked the mother if she was sure it was her first. The mother didn't know, but nodded yes anyway. The other baby took hours. His mother thought of him within the cartoon of a belly, pink walls and a trampoline of flesh. Maybe his miniature toes would skip across it in leaps and bounds and perhaps that was why he stayed so long. He wasn't ready to leave that sticky, warm enclosure for another that was moistened with sweat and the obtrusive glow of fluorescent lighting. The air conditioning was broken in the hospital and the both of the mother's hair was flattened against their brows. The nurse carried a paper fan and swung it slowly in the general direction of her face. It didn't help much. Especially because she continued to have to jump up on her swollen ankles to bring water or bedpans to the mothers.

One mother was silent and confused about angry events that had happened earlier that day. She remembered that her husband's face was red and his voice sounded like sandpaper. She asked the nurse if he was outside smoking. Maybe, she thought, it was too hot for him inside, but the nurse only shrugged as a reply. The walls tightened around her, painted sprigs of roses and the smell of disinfectant.

There were a lot of babies born that summer. Rows of pink and blue bonnets and rounded bellies rose and fell. The nurse was tired. Sometimes, she imagined herself falling into the stale plastic bassinets and sleeping deeply among the infantile gurgles and whines around her. She also thought that, at points, there were too many babies with too many pink and blue hats. It was possible that she could switch them and their parents would never know—it must have happened before. After all, most of the babies looked the same. Some had eyes the color of the earth and

others were fat and oozed with rolls. But most of the babies were the same. The nurse never acted on those thoughts; she was never that tempted. Instead, she returned to her apartment and the flicker of the television and the smell of her own sweat.

On certain nights the nurse pretended that she was a mother. Sometimes, when no one was looking she held their fingers—fingernails like mollusks, or the inside of an oyster. The babies were mostly unscathed, their bodies and orange-sized brains not yet tampered with the weight of the world they would grow into. She liked them this way, comforted and safe. Still, she wondered what would happen if they were not returned to their cylindrical plastic enclosures. She didn't think that much would. Their parents didn't need them as much as she did. Maybe, she could help them, be a form of divine intervention. Maybe if she took the ones away from the mothers would couldn't kick their habits just yet or from the fathers who stared in her direction for just a second too long.

The nurse was once someone's baby too, but she never thought of that. An old man in the grocery store she visited after her night shifts did. The old man bagged groceries out of boredom and in silence. His wife had died last year. One of his babies was in New York and the other was maybe dead, or maybe in Jacksonville at the Lazy J Saloon (he had received a letter from that address a few years prior). He had been a father at some point in his life. That was centuries ago. He pretended that maybe the woman who wore scrubs and pink eyeshadow could be his baby (the one who may or may not be in Jacksonville). She seemed right, but maybe not, too.

The nurse watched her reflection in the darkened grocery-store window, features blurred in the dark until she noticed the old man behind her, watching. She spent too much time in the grocery store he thought, walking among popcorn, and coffee and shaving cream. He toyed with

the illusion of their familial connection until one morning when she flashed a toothy smile in his direction and he saw the shape of her teeth—not quite right and far too yellow.

The man went on three dates with the nurse, twice to the movies and once to a deli next to a Seven-Eleven and across the street from the hospital. In the darkness of the theatre he was able to feel a sense of closeness to her darkened shape. He let the faint flicker of the film and the separation, the lack of voices and polite conversation dampen his image of her.

After he rehearsed the words in his mind he turned to the woman and asked,

Should I kiss you now?

I have lipstick on, the nurse replied.

It was true, the nurse had painted her lips the same bubblegum pink of her eyelids for their first date.

I've kissed women wearing lipstick before, the man said.

No, you don't understand, this is a special sort of lipstick, it'll stay on your lips for days, she said.

Maybe I would look nice in pink, the man tried to joke.

She smiled for a second before shoving a mouthful of popcorn behind those pink lips.

He held her hand twice during each movie, until their dual anxiety left traces of sweat between their fingers and the man quietly wriggled his away—pretending to reach into his emptied packet of Reese's Pieces. He kissed her during the credits of the second movie—wet, clinging and smelling of butter.

He never saw her again. He never called and the other nurses in the maternity ward told her that she could never call him first. It was desperate and clingy. Still, it was easy for the man to imagine the woman in ways that she was not and never would be. Their separation allowed the

man something to construct in his own mind (he had the habit of doing this). The idealized image of the lonely woman wearing pink eyeshadow was much better than the contorted feeling of her next to him in the darkened cinema. The man thought that perhaps it was easier to imagine this woman in his mind, until the point that he could materialize her next to him in bed or sitting in the passenger seat of his car. The fractured and imagined woman became easier than her material counterpart. And that, the man thought, felt the same way he felt each time he remembered the smell of swordfish. As to him, it was the sort of smell that even if he hadn't smelled in years, when he did, he could *taste* it as if he had a bite rolling behind his molars.

III. Teasing Light

A woman with a voice that sounded like paper being ripped lengthwise time and time again sat next to the man on the train. They were traveling to Albuquerque for no particular reason besides the fact that the ticket was the cheapest and the man had never been to the desert. The train often traveled in close proximity to the highway, billboards advertised canned food and pizza, one in particular 955-CREMATION appeared in several states. The man turned to the woman and laughed.

I guess you have to die everywhere, she said.

Not in Oklahoma, he said.

Especially in Oklahoma, she said and took a bite of her chocolate bar.

The man liked this and smiled to himself for the next hour. The man and the woman were meshed with a series of transient beings on the train, their comings and goings were inconsequential to one another. Yet, they watched each other for entertainment. A man across the aisle chewed on a peach, delicately pulled the faint fuzzy skin with his front teeth from the warm, wetter interior. Peach juice dripped onto the front of his suit.

The man woke sometime during the night to the dull vibration of the train. The woman was curled against the window, her knees tucked to her chest and in the faint light, her mouth slightly ajar. First his neck, then his back cracked, bones and muscles wailed against the constraint, the weight of his own body pressing against them. He rose, shuffled down the narrow aisle way and into the space between the cars of the train. There were two men who stood there and the man smelled the scent of sour, stale beer. The taller of the two men offered him one—it with slightly warm with a label he didn't recognize. The man gulped down a sip and the amber

liquid felt cool against the dryness of his throat. The men exchanged a casual, quiet sort of conversation, just enough to feel comfortable enough to return back into silence. The landscape was riddled with rock and the lights of stray houses and towns, railroad crossings are bright and obtrusive to the cloud-darkened landscape. They smoked a cigarette and the man threw his empty beer can into a plastic bag the men had been using for their empties.

Where are we? the man asked the two shapes.

Don't know, one said.

It all looks the same from where we're standing, the other said.

Do you have the time? he asked.

I don't have it but I know it, one replied.

The other laughed and crunched his empty beer can in the middle.

I'd say it's the middle of the night, but you probably knew that.

Both of the men laughed until the partition door closed behind the man.

He woke again—the space around him seemed void, pre-packed and flimsy. The aisle slanted and skewed by the heaviness of sleep. The tilt of his walk led him to the space between the train cars. The two men faced him. He was unsure if they were the same men, but before he thought too much one passed him a flask and he was drinking in eager gulps. The liquid burned slightly on the way down, but with a pleasant sort of familiarity. He could not see the faces of the men, but could smell their dual presence there. He asked the men how much longer until Albuquerque and they both shrugged.

We don't know those things, the taller one said.

Should be by morning, the man replied.

We don't know, the shorter one said.

The man woke and fell towards the aisle. The woman was still curled next to him, one leg stretched before her, the other balanced her delicate chin. He wondered how she could sleep that way. His body did not contort into shapes besides sit, stand, lay. Unsure, but unbothered that his tumble into the aisle-way has not awakened her, or anyone else in the car, he slumped towards the space between the cars. For one reason or another, the man, although placing each hand upon alternating headrests could not see the steel door, or feel the chill of the outside air. The monotony of the grey-blue zigzagged seats, the people all turned from him and asleep began to fade into one another. And almost without realizing it the man was unsure if he could distinguish the woman from any of the other women on the train. Although he knew he has passed her, each tuft of hair and blue jacket became the woman. Happy now to return to either his seat or to the space between the cars, the man turned around—the end of the car still not in sight. The rise and fall of each of his legs was tiring him. The blur of the landscape promoted the slightest twinge of nausea, the feeling of licorice in his stomach. The man stopped, and stood still, palms vibrating slightly on the headrests. He closed first one eye, then the other, allowed that steel container to become a grainy blur and then complete darkness. He began to move again and each headrest felt the same underneath his palms; the sensation of touch guided him in the way he imagined the blind must do. When the man opened his eyes, he was between the cars again and one man handed him a beer, and the other handed him the flask. The liquid felt good and would always feel good. Liquid trickled down his esophagus and into his stomach—no longer straining against itself. One of the men reached out and steadied the man's arm as he lit a cigarette. The darkness was still full and dense; no light betrayed dawn's arrival. The landscape appeared the same as it did the first time the man found himself between the two train cars—a conflation of barely distinguishable forms of rock and house, of telephone pole and tree.

The man woke and noticed the white-splotched, dew-moistened and drip-stained window to his left. The light outside seemed slightly dim, as if in a halogen bulb. Watercolor Jesus peered from a pamphlet in the seat in front of him and a sputtering fly buzzed lazily, time in and time out again against the pink speckled wall beneath the window. The woman climbed over his knees into the seat by the window. She smelled of lavender and was wearing a straw hat.

Are we close? the man asked.

The woman laughed and gestured towards the window,

We have a day to go. We've only just left.

IV. In the Vicinity

I can hear the water boiling, she said, before she heard the water boiling.

The man's sister said that she heard the water boiling because she smelled her boyfriend's breath against her shoulder blades. It smelled of oniony sweat and chicken. The man had never met his sister's boyfriend, but knew he worked in a kitchen and lived above a lighting shop. Whenever the sister smelled that sweat, his post-work smell, she remembered being a child in a Mickey Mouse costume standing on a riser singing "It's a Small World After All" and smelling her own sweat for the first time.

Sometimes, when she noticed something disgusting it would multiply again and again until it was ten times worse than it was to begin with. She then begged herself to forget it and wished she had never noticed it to begin with. If she had never noticed it, it wouldn't exist. It wouldn't prickle and pry like the sound of a toddler on a south-bound bus rapping his ankles against the stiff plastic seats. It wouldn't sound like knuckles cracking. She heard each particle expand and contract and imagined the fluid spewing between delicate finger bones.

After she told him the water was boiling he went to check it. He was naked and she saw a boil on his left ass-cheek. She grimaced and looked away. Her disdain compiled after years of speckled globs of spit in the snow and ragged fingernails. She thought that if he was a new lover, a man she had only fixated upon, and didn't know really, she wouldn't see the boil—its craterous redness and small puff of white puss.

When she walked into the kitchen he pretended to drop the saucepan of boiling water onto her bare chest. She jumped back, clumsily collided into the wall behind her. The boyfriend shrieked in laughter and placed the pan back onto the surface of the stove.

I dare you to drop that pot of fucking boiling water on me, she said

He laughed and she noticed an orange strand between two of his teeth.

Do you remember the hot dogs? she asked.

He said, Yes, I remember the hot dogs.

Asshole, she replied.

I wasn't going to drop it, he said and looked away.

Last summer when the pale green walls were silently oozing in their own thin membrane of sweat the boyfriend burned two hot dogs into the pot. The sister and her boyfriend were drunk, drunk in a way that never recognized itself but instead kept searching itself for its own drunkenness. They drank into the night, until the darkness of night and the harshness of the yellowing streetlights bled into one another and were almost indistinguishable. The boyfriend wondered if she were only wearing a garter belt under the yellow sundress. He knew she wasn't, but liked to think about the roundness of her ass beneath black straps, anyway.

They came home and he dropped hot dogs into a pot they had made spaghetti in before they had left, six hours earlier. She grasped one with the edges of her fingernails and wagged it before his face before letting it splash into the water.

They're disgusting, she said

Can you cut that shit out? he said and shoved her against the corner of the yellow speckled linoleum countertop.

They're disgusting, she said again.

I don't care, he replied and sank into a chair.

They fell asleep at the kitchen table and the hot dogs bubbled and burped and then burned. When she woke the kitchen was hot, hot not just in the humidity of July in Illinois, but

hot in the way a campfire feels. She jumped up and turned off the stove and screamed until her ears felt hot. He smacked her and she imagined it was the way you would smack a disobedient toddler with jam around its mouth and magic marker on its pink shirt.

The next morning, she searched blindly for water in the heaviness of the still smoky air, and gulped down two glasses at the kitchen sink. A dull pain nipped against her hip bone that felt like frost and heat at the same time. That same morning, the man rose and watched the sun reflect in fissures through the curtain. The alcohol from the night before ached behind his eyelids as he checked the calendar. It was his sister's birthday. He could call later, he told himself. She was still asleep; it was early in Illinois.

Morning is the Long Way Home

Sometime in the moments after the sun had begun to rise, the wife lifted the cup of coffee to her lips for the first time. The man slumped downstairs half asleep. First his toes, then his heels thumped against the thin wood slatted stairs a quarter inch too thin in a pattern the wife recognized. His footsteps paused on the final step. In that pause, his wife looked up and saw the faint outline of herself in the floor to ceiling window that was only slightly darkened by the gray hour directly chasing the dawn. She noticed her cheeks were red. The baby cradled against her chest appeared smaller than it did when she looked down at her.

Cabin fever, I guess.

Something like that.

The man poured himself a cup of coffee, then heaped one, two, three, spoonfuls of sugar and a satisfying glug of half and half into the cup. The coffee had cooled by then; she had let it sit for too long. He didn't mind. Incorrect restaurant orders, being cut in line, he all let pass in silent passivity. His wife often sputtered and sighed in exaggerated anger in the direction of

strangers; patience and human error seemed almost foreign to her. But at the same time, bank tellers, drive-through workers and record shop owners found themselves talking to the wife for minutes longer than they anticipated. She was not one for vague niceties; she was the sort of person who asked: *How is your day going, really?* The man nodded instead. Acquaintances described his as normal enough, pleasant and distant, but they always said he had a nice laugh.

The house was sandwiched between two farms—one an old horse farm that had been sold and resold until the fence lines crumpled. The only creatures that meandered the rock spotted pastures were an aging chestnut mare and small gray donkey. A guilt riddled grandson came to replenish their round bale or pour bucket after bucket of sputtering water into their fifty-gallon trough. On the other side of the house, a pale-faced man and his wife had three llamas who made strange noises that began often around nightfall and only stopped when the neighbor stumbled out and flicked on the Christmas lights that illuminated the llama's shed. Something about the light cut their wails into gentle hums and groans. The neighbor's wife liked to think they were afraid of the dark, but the neighbor only said they were too stupid to see their hay without it and that the electric bill was thirty dollars more that month.

Across the street from the white farmhouse an insurance salesman lived with his sister who worked as a secretary for a personal injury lawyer. Each day when the man or his wife walked to the mailbox to get their mail, the salesman waved to them from across the street. They had only spoken with the salesman a few times. Each time they saw him, the salesman was rocking forward and backward on a rusted green lawn chair. He sat there until the sky became dark. Sometimes, the blue glow of the television illuminated his square form—rocking, until he dissolved into the split-level. No one ever noticed him leave, they only noticed if he was gone.

Their farmhouse was coated in a sheen of stickiness. The doorknobs and light fixtures contained a series of scuffs and scraps. On Friday the house smelled of disinfectant—that was cleaning day.

We're the only ones here, anyway, the man said.

Sometimes, the wife gestured towards the toddler and the baby as a response.

Why do you think it looks the way it does? the man replied.

I'm keeping it clean for them, the wife replied.

They don't know the difference between peas and carrots, the man said quietly.

They know, she said.

The wife cleaned, scrubbed at the muddied light switches and window frames. These things didn't bother the man. The wife was earnest. She was trying. The man was without direction. The wife reminded him of this. His office was a series of leaning loose-leaf and dog-eared novels. A lacquer-sheened desk was sandwiched between two bookshelves, a computer he didn't really know how to use was in one corner, a series of yellow lined pads was in the other. Sometimes, the lamplight of that back room was obtrusive to the man, but the wife flicked it on.

Bad for your eyes, she said.

He groaned as a response.

So, he started walking. The walking began first in the summer when the afternoon sun boiled in the glass-paned living room. It felt like a greenhouse and the tightness of the air was infuriating against the man's sweat-slickened brow. The fault with those floor to ceiling windows was that they attracted the heat and the chill in either the summer or the winter. After he signed the lease the year before the man had run his hands along the seams of the windows. His fingers left thin, oblong smudges. After he stood before the windows for a long moment he turned to his

wife and told her that they wouldn't open. She had known this, been aware of the mechanical limitations that could never allow windows that size to open at any angle. Surprised that her husband had not also been aware of this seemingly obvious logic, she only nodded as a response.

As a response to the fever beneath his brow, the light-headedness of the late afternoon heat—the man ambled in the woods that bordered the house. He began by sitting in a rotting Adirondack chair, back faced to the house. But after he finished one, or two or sometimes three beers he rose. The woods were nothing out of the ordinary. Their underbrush was dense and the trees, thin and spindly. Lichen and moss coated the lower trunks and continuous boulders dotted the New England terrain. The topography was a perpetual slope and the man clumsily half ran, half walked down the hills. Miniature avalanches of clay and rock announced his presence and sent salamanders and chipmunks into the darkness of the forest. He was aware of his loudness in the woods. Besides his human noises, the forest was only rarely disturbed by the sound of cars passing or an airplane overhead. Still, the presence of humans was apparent in that place that felt so desolate—stone walls and barbed wire speckled the landscape.

Still, it was nothing like the pure vacancy of the Canadian wilderness the man had traversed with his father so many years prior. Sometimes, the man thought of his father as he walked, his mother too. His mind wandered. He didn't see them much anymore. They visited from Illinois two times a year—once for Christmas and once again for a neutral time between the children's birthdays in late July. Each time they visited, the man noticed the progressive fragility of his father. The father had always been a quiet man, content to sit and evaporate into the hum of the crowd. Pale purple veins now caressed his cheeks and ringed his drooping eyes. The grandfather was content to spend what felt like the entirety of the visit slumped in a leather armchair in the glass-paned living room. The man knew his father was old, dying, which he did,

five years later. His grandchildren flitted in and out; they spun and fell into one another. The wife made the grandfather pork tenderloin sandwiches for lunch.

The walking became a routine at some point and stretched into longer and longer time in the woods. Each walk was different, the man said. He noticed small growths that had not been there the day before or occasionally found himself in places he had never been—in the backyard of a house a mile down the road, or standing in the emptiness of a freshly cut cornfield. Each afternoon he drank the allotted amount of beer and headed back into that place that smelled of moisture and earth. Sometimes, he smoked cigarettes—a habit he and his wife had kicked before the birth of their first child. Always careful to deposit the ashes into the open mouth of an empty beer can the man also buried his hands in the earthy wetness of the dirt. He pressed them deep beneath the leaves before he dried them on a mossy outcropping or in a low stream. The wife sometimes thought she could smell the thin acidic stench when he returned, but she never said anything. He always returned before sundown or right after the sun had set. The days were getting shorter, he said, time was fading faster.

In the mornings, the man silently padded into the blue tinged guest bathroom. He grasped the smooth curved edges of the sink and stared into the mirror before him, mind running over an internal list he would come to call his sins. Before he noticed, but after it had become habit, the man had begun walking in the morning, too. He walked during the early hours few considered morning; instead they called it night. Those who regarded that weak light emptiness as morning were dairy farmers and newspaper delivery boys. At that hour, the earth retained a dense chill and cars were fewer and scattered in between; airplanes were non-existent and the forest held only a sound of sleepless animals rummaging in the leaves. The man poured his coffee into a metal thermos before adding one, two, three shots of Baileys. This habit began accidentally. One

morning the wife had used the last of the half and half and instead of telling the man, she had left the carton with two drops left in the fridge. This angered the man until he remembered the Baileys below the sink and relished in the slight sweetness of his coffee. Once he had become slightly lubricated with the cream liqueur he began to think, to stew in his perpetual loneliness. Often, he imagined a membrane, an alienation between himself and his body. He felt a discomfort of meeting his eye, the container of the thing he had once called his soul. Those early morning thoughts felt like treading water and only became calmer in the exhaustion he felt after a steep hill and once his heaving had returned to faint wheezes and muttering utterances.

At the same time that the man found himself retreating into forest, the insurance salesman across the street had grown disconsolate in the yellow tinged monotony of his days. He thought that there must be something better. He wasn't sure what it was, but he had the ever-present feeling that there was a different life possible.

Most people need insurance, or want it for the inevitable or the unknown. Some insurance packages cost more than others but are perfect for the paranoia of the suburban housewife who drives a moderately expensive car and treats herself to designer handbags or wool coats once a year. Some insurance is basic and costs more than it gives—but he isn't supposed to say that. The salesman once sold life insurance, something that no one thinks they need, or wants to need, or wants to even have. Here, the salesman discovered his clients wrestled with their own mortality in the wood-paneled walls of his shared office. They never wanted to admit it, and the salesman couldn't sell nervous men in button-downs their own lives. So, he went back to selling car and home insurance—things everyone needed and something he barely had to sell.

In the summer, the office was air-conditioned and the salesman was chilled beneath his suit and the tie. He watched clients stumble in from the outside, a wave of heat wafting in and

then fading as the door ricocheted back onto its frame. When the salesman left, the heat became a welcomed discomfort against the artificiality of the air that pumped through his lungs during the hours spent in the office. His sister noticed the same thing. But she was a secretary, so her desk was closer to the door. She could watch the passing of foot traffic and gulp down a mouthful of tempered air before brandishing an iridescent smile to the shape in the doorway.

The other salesmen in the office had families, and often went on vacation with them. After each trip, the salesman was shown photos of the beach, of Mickey and Minnie clutching the sunburnt limbs of their children. Sometimes, he thought of what it would be like to have a family. To not live in the house he grew up in with his sister who was content to watch Wheel of Fortune until she fell asleep in her purple recliner that stank of fish sticks and TV dinner. Each year, each salesperson in the office was allotted one week of vacation time, nothing more, nothing less. Instead of going to Florida or to the Cape, the man had what he called his staycation. He explored the familiarly of his own home. Some years, he painted a room. One year, he painted two, the back guest bedroom and the bathroom—both a color called Tangerine Dream. Other years he evaporated into the silence, sat in his sister's recliner or in her room—experienced the foreign familiarity of it. He sat until he decided she may have planted cameras. Then he imagined that her things had not been the way they had been before, even though they always were. Besides, she never said anything.

That year the salesman sat as he always had on the front concrete slab porch. He waved to the neighbors before retreating inside and eating a microwave pizza in bed. One afternoon he raised his eyes and saw the office empty and the lights off, besides a florescent that sputtered in the hallway next to his desk. The salesman stood, shrugged on his coat and checked his pockets for his wallet and keys. He planned on leaving until he noticed the photos on the desk next to his.

The man who usually occupied that space had a receding hairline and wore ties for every holiday—even President's Day. The photograph was slightly blurry, but he could see the family on a beach. It was odd to see his coworker in a t-shirt and without a tie. The frame was coated with fake seashells and a girl in braids held a small Chihuahua. The salesman looked at the photo for a moment and then looked at the next desk. This desk belonged to a young woman with eyes the color of water. This woman, although he was ashamed to admit it even to himself, he had watched and studied in her first weeks and months in the office. On her desk was a photograph of her and a man in the sunset, they were kissing but their faces were sunburnt and on the frame was painted: *My happy place is the beach!* The salesman continued through the office, surprised that he had never noticed the photos before, families and pets, husbands, girlfriends—most of them were at the beach, an amusement park, or at a backyard party.

The man went home that night and sat on the concrete slab. The next morning, he called a local photographer whose number he found on bulletin board in a diner downtown.

The salesman had never been on a plane. He had also never been on more than three or four dates with a woman. Perhaps, he thought, being overworked in the insurance office, and spending his staycation alone each year had inhibited something. That was the cause of his restlessness. But, until his next vacation week (in May of the next year) the photograph would have to do. The salesman made sure to firmly press the glossy image into the glass frame until there were no ripples. He shook the frame and watched the fake blue water bubble and settle—the microscopic fish and sea shells fell first. He sighed deeply and imagined himself in that water. The photograph was the most beautiful thing the man owned.

He woke before dawn on Monday morning, drove the twenty minutes to work and sat in his car until he saw the janitors leave the door ajar. The salesman positioned the photograph on

the edge of his desk and walked up and down the hallway. He looked away from it and then back again as if seeing it for the first time. Here, he thought, was the purpose and the root of his melancholy. This vacation had saved and rejuvenated him. The salesman smiled to himself and rubbed self-tanner into his cheeks and neck. Later at home, he noticed the uneven line of orange on his pale and veiny chest and laughed. The tan lines were evidence of the vacation; each time he looked at them he felt the sun again.

His coworkers didn't notice the photograph until lunch, or at least didn't say anything. The woman with eyes like water was the first to notice.

Were you away this weekend? she asked.

I was on a trip with my girlfriend, he said.

She lifted the photograph with her slender fingers and smiled down at the salesman. There was something in her eyes that betrayed her, a sense of discomfort or nervousness. Jealousy, the man thought; she must be jealous. Later, in the break room one of the men who sold life insurance asked the salesman how long he had been dating his girlfriend.

Eighteen months, the salesman said.

Where did you meet? the life insurance man asked.

Bingo, the salesman said.

Good for you, the life insurance salesman said and coughed into his elbow.

She's a beautiful woman, another salesman said.

He smiled to himself for the rest of the day, snuck glances towards the photograph, allowed his eyes wander over the woman in the picture, with pale skin and hair the color of wheat. At one point, he watched his finger, stained orange with tanner, stroke the length of her dwarfed body. She was beautiful, and worthy of a vacation. Next perhaps, they could go to

Cancun or to the white sand beaches of the Caribbean. Better yet, he could spring for a cruise, one with live music and snorkeling trips.

The salesman sat with another copy of the photograph next to him on the concrete slab. He felt a closeness he hadn't felt in years, the presence, the physical weight of the photograph comforted him and seemed to whisper to him that *he wasn't alone.* Somehow, the salesman fell asleep outside, the August air was just warm enough that night to not disturb his sleep. The comfort of the photograph and the woman in it lulled him into dreams of places he had never been, foods he had only seen, all in the murky backlit glow of the television. He waltzed with the woman on the deck of a cruise ship, her hair lightened by the days in the sun and her teeth seemed whiter against her tan skin. In his first waking moments, he thought it was possible he wouldn't return to the insurance office. He imagined that he called the woman in the photo and began their vacation now. Spontaneous, he thought and liked it; he was spontaneous now. His back was sore from sleeping in the thinly padded chair. The photograph was curling on the edges—moisture thick on the table to his right. He flattened the photograph again and again—finally he stretched it between his hands, her smile was still the same, and the water was still crystalline blue. He sighed deeply and looked up.

The man across the street was drunk that morning. It was one of the first times he admitted that to himself. The Baileys had slowly run out, and the vodka had begun to seep in. He wasn't sure how it had happened, as most things in his life, but it was happening now and the insurance salesman across the street was waving at him. The man waved back, a heaviness in his joints and their subsequent limbs only allowed for one, two, unenthusiastic sputters. The salesman rose and gestured to him. The man watched himself lurch across the pavement that separated their homes. There was a faint excited buzz, the clamor of words and sentences the

man only heard some of. The insurance salesman—a pale, shuffling man who wore thin reading classes and was balding in an almost perfect circle was shoving a photograph before him. In the constrained light of the space before morning the man's eyes traced the image. There was the salesman, leaning slightly forward, his hands awkwardly clutching the shoulders of a young woman whose eyes were ringed in blue eyeliner. The salesman and the woman wore matching tropical shirts—a burnt orange set against pale pink flowers. The backdrop was a garishly painted fake beach, palm trees speckled the foreground and a turquoise sea met a yellow beach, complete with sailboats and sandcastles. The background looked like the set of a high school play. The man looked at the salesman again. The salesman licked his lips and nervously pulled the photograph from each end with orange streaked hands, the glossiness reverberating slightly.

This, he said, is my girlfriend.

Where were you? the man replied.

You know, on vacation. Isn't she beautiful, the salesman said.

The man asked what her name was.

Anne, after her father's mother, the salesman replied.

The man watched the slow crawl of pride trickle over the salesman's limbs, the illusion of a life imagined in paint and Styrofoam. Unsure if the salesman had somehow slipped into this apparition to the point of belief, the man smiled and looked away. His drunkenness thudded against his skull and in his throat. He felt a sense of dread, and the stickiness of the salesman's breath against his body, eyes unabashed and clinging. A deep twist in his stomach launched the regurgitated taste of vodka into his nose and throat.

I thought I might take her on a cruise, the salesman said.

Just not show up to work, he continued.

The man nodded.

We had such a nice time last week, he whispered.

Where do you want to go? the man asked, hands plunged into pockets.

Anywhere, anywhere with her is like vacation.

A car passed and the intrusive sound of wheels against pavement ricocheted between the men. Somewhere a dog barked and the man wished he was less drunk, or at home, or not in the front lawn of the insurance salesman's house.

Do you think I should do it? the salesman asked.

Do what? the man replied.

Ask my girlfriend to go on the cruise. Forget that, just buy the tickets, spontaneous like.

He continued,

You have a wife. Do you take your wife on vacation?

The man began to laugh, a deep guttural sound that started as a quiet chuckle. He looked at the photograph still stretched between the hands of the salesman, his eyes masked by the reflective surface of his wire glasses. He laughed until the salesman looked away. Then, he reached out, patted the salesman on the back. He had the strange desire to hug the odd man who retracted from his touch—but he didn't. Instead he looked at the salesman in the place where his eyes would be.

My wife always wants to go on vacation, but we never have the time, the man said.

The salesman looked up.

I should take her on vacation, the man continued.

When we went away we forgot about the rest of the world, he said after a moment's pause.

The salesman began to grin and didn't stop until his plane landed in Florida later the next day. He was alone, but didn't care. The air was warm and the photograph was stowed carefully between the pages of the book he had bought for the beach. He checked on it three times during the flight (the flight attendants announced that objects may shift during take-off and landing). But it was there each time he checked, and always would be.

That morning the dawn appeared as if consumed by a soft grayness—tones of tangerine and pale blue masked by the weight of the forest and the end of the apprehension of its coming. The impenetrable darkness eventually lost itself, and in doing so, shed illusion, and exposed decay.

You / The Urge / The Sky

The man had a hard time eating breakfast. He developed this complication over the summer and blamed it on the heat. It was too sticky to eat. Some mornings the wife made morning glory muffins with carrots and brown sugar. Other mornings she made blueberry muffins. Those had a strange acidity to them that only the man seemed to taste. He asked his wife about the taste once and she cried. Some mornings the man stopped at McDonald's and got a coffee. Other mornings he would order an egg McMuffin or hashbrowns. The man sat in his two door sedan with the muffler decaying at the end and tried to force himself to eat. He learned that if he didn't think about it too hard, if he listened to the radio carefully or counted the cars that passed he could stomach a few bites. Some days he gagged, battling nausea and the overwhelming smell of overcooked meat. He never vomited. The nausea wasn't deep enough in his stomach, and wasn't a real sort of nausea anyway, just the kind that didn't allow him to eat. The man was fat. He could eat dinner, but not enough to make him that fat. His belly was round

in the way that most men develop when they reach a certain age, especially if they drink beer and liquor with or for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

That spring the wife looked older, tired and once she was home, didn't leave again. He was sorry but didn't know how to fix it as they didn't talk much those days. They talked to their children, together and separately. The wife talked more, but she always had. One morning, as they sat alone in the glass-paned living room she turned to him and said,

I need to ask you something.

Go easy, the man replied.

I want you to do something for me, the wife said.

The man forced down a sip of coffee.

I want you to do something about that, the wife gestured to the paper bags full of recyclables, of beer bottles.

Take out the recycling? the man asked.

You know what I mean, she said.

I don't think I do, he said, coffee and anger bubbling in his throat. He didn't mean to react this way, or to feel this way. He didn't react much. But, still, he didn't want to feel contempt for the woman. He had loved her, still did just in a different way.

The woman paused and looked away, when she looked back, she said,

About the drinking.

There's nothing wrong with it, the man said, don't worry.

You're an alcoholic, she said.

No, the man said, and righted himself, you're an alcoholic.

I was, the woman replied.

You can't judge me like that, the man said, I dealt with your shit for years.

And now I'm dealing with yours, the woman said under her breath.

What? he retorted, anger building.

There weren't children then, the wife said and began to cry.

Before the man could reply, the wife was up the stairs and he heard a door slam somewhere in the house. The silence was cool but his ears were hot. He faced the floor-to-ceiling windows and watched the faint fog, the overnight moisture begin to lift. It was going to be a hot day, he thought, hot and sticky and sweaty. The sound of the wife and the children upstairs was heavy and consuming. They kept their distance. The girl drew in her room and caught frogs and other musty creatures in the forest. The boy wrote his grandfather a letter every other week and played baseball. The children loved the man; he knew that, they were unaware of the anxieties of the mother and the complications of their father. They were children, he thought, oblivious and happy. On the drive to work that morning he reminded himself that he was a good father. He laughed and listened to their jokes, bought them presents when he went to Chicago and watched cartoons with them. That same morning, he avoided McDonald's and drove straight to work, drinking vodka out of a coffee cup on the way.

One afternoon when the wife was pulling weeds out of the garden the landlord's car came down the driveway. The man sat in the stillness of the living room, sweat swelling even in his stagnancy. He watched the woman and the landlord through the window. The children tumbled across the lawn, the slight hill, the sandbox in the corner in a tumultuous motion. Trees hung over the back of the garden. The landlord was wearing sunglasses and khaki shorts. He high-fived the children and then wiped his hands on the back of his shorts. He had inherited the house from his parents a few years back and had allowed the family to continue to rent it. They had

lived there since before the children. At first, he thought it would be too small for a family, but the house seemed have have swelled with the birth of each child, and with the accumulation of things. The wife had converted her loft into a pale pink nursery and the man slept in his study most nights. They couldn't use it as a bedroom, for the children anyway. There was a screen door to the backyard that thumped in the wind or snow. The wife spoke to the landlord with her hands on her hips, clad in gardening gloves, rich dirt caked on her elbows and knees. Before the landlord left, he patted the woman on her shoulder, an awkward attempt at intimacy, the man thought, and waved goodbye to the children. He also turned to the glass wall the man sat behind and waved. The man hadn't realized the landlord could see him, and felt a twinge of anxiety for not going outside. So, he waved back and gestured to the TV—he was watching something. Tears bubbled on the edges of the wife's eyes when she came in.

What? the man asked.

We have to go, she said, and sank into the couch next to him.

What do you mean? he asked.

The landlord said he was sorry but he had to ask us to leave by the end of next month, she replied, he said he was sorry but he has to sell the house.

What month? the man asked.

I don't know, she said flustered, two months, that's all I know.

The man sat and stared at the glass wall.

He asked if we want to buy it, the wife said.

We can't buy it, he replied, we don't have that kind of money.

We'll get another house, the wife said.

Not like this house, the man said, this house is where everything has happened. This is where we moved when we were first married. We brought the children back here after they were born. They've grown up here.

It needs a new septic system, the wife replied.

They'll change everything, the man said, they won't appreciate it the way we do. We love this house.

They'll sell the land and develop it, the wife said, that's what the landlord told me.

Goddamn it, the man said and looked out the window.

The wife curled into his shoulder, and he held her close to his side. A state of intimacy they hadn't felt in months or years stretched between them. He felt the wetness of her tears as they leaked through his T-shirt.

I'm glad we had this house, he said and pressed her head into his shoulders.

Maybe we can move back when we're old and rich, she said and laughed.

*

The morning of the move the man drove to get breakfast. His wife was breathless and panicked in a way the man had not seen before. Her parents came to help them; they were old and he could feel her father watch him through his thick glasses. Breakfast in the north-facing parking lot of the McDonald's sandwiched between a collision repair center and another fast food restaurant had become habit for the man. He told them he was going to get more tape, another Sharpie and drove to the fast food restaurant. The vodka was under the passenger seat and he drank it on the way, calming his anxiety. There was something about the potency of the overcooked meat and fluffy square egg that ignited his appetite. The fresh fruit and cinnamon

coated pastries his wife toiled over turned his stomach and he gagged each time he tried to take a bite. Each morning was a perpetual rush while the man helped his wife as much as he could in the dizzying task of preparing their children for school. The pastries were deposited into a crumpled bag or held in a paper towel. The man would then throw them onto the road a few miles from their home. He felt guilty, but didn't know what else to do with the sugar-crusted breakfast food. He simply couldn't eat.

The radio channels in the morning, the time everyone commuted, or drove somewhere was mostly dominated by the weather or the news. Sometimes, he listened to bad pop music or found a moment of calm in classical. The classical station always had a faint static quality so he could never listen for too long. One of the radio stations had a call in dating show with a man called Mikey the Matchmaker. The Matchmaker claimed to have perfected the science of compatibility. He could match soulmates off of their likes and dislikes, the pitch of their voice and their answers to very specific questions. The Matchmaker interviewed his clients on the air and then opened the phone lines to any listeners who thought they may be a match to his client. He would then ask the caller similar, but never the same, questions. He decided if they were a match, or not. Either way they could exchange phone numbers or email addresses.

The Matchmaker began his show and said,

I'm here to find Mr. Right for a girl who keeps getting stuck with Mr. Wrong. I want to find this woman the love of her life. Can we make it happen? I think so!

The radio blared fake applause and the man bit into his egg McMuffin.

The Matchmaker continued, Today we have a lovely girl, a lovely caller who I can't believe is still single.

The man scratched at a stain that had worked its way into the fabric of his pants. It was yellow, egg maybe, or mustard.

So, before we take any potential matches, let's get to know you, the matchmaker said.

Hi, said a voice. A female voice that was slightly squeaky. It sounded nervous. The man began to listen more closely.

Hi, the voice said again, my name is Carol. I'm pretty single right now. I live in New York City.

The Matchmaker cut her off, The Big Apple, he shrieked in excitement.

Yes, the voice said, I work for a bank there, I hand out snow cones or juice on the sidewalk. It's a way to promote the bank. Sometimes we give the homeless blankets with the bank logo on them.

Wow, the matchmaker said.

It's supposed to make the bank look good. Like we're humanitarians, that's what they told us, she said.

Why are you single? the matchmaker asked.

I meet a lot of people, Carol said slowly.

And? he asked again.

But I don't really meet them, she said, they want the free things I'm giving them, but usually that's it.

What about goin' out on the town girl? the matchmaker asked, it's New Yawk.

He said the last phrase in a fake Brooklyn accent and the man shuddered in his car, feeling a sense of embarrassment for the matchmaker hundreds of miles away.

Sometimes you just stop meeting new people, Carol said.

Not today! The matchmaker said and laughed loudly.

The man had finished his breakfast sandwich at this point and was marinating in the warmth his car had collected through the sunroof. He was tired and the heat felt good, like he could fall asleep for hours in the driver's seat of his car.

So let's get started with some questions, the matchmaker said.

If you think so, Carol replied.

What is your ideal date? he asked.

The radio went quiet for a few seconds too long.

Carol coughed and said, I like to be outside. Being inside for too long feels claustrophobic for me. Sometimes, on the weekend I sit on my roof. Other weekends I take the train to Rockaway or Coney Island. So maybe we could do that.

Get some famous Nathan’s hot dogs! the matchmaker yelled.

I don’t eat meat, Carol replied.

The matchmaker ignored her response and asked his next question,

So, Carol, What are you passionate about?

The drums, she said.

Can you elaborate on that? the matchmaker asked.

I play the drums, she said, the jazz drums. I have since I was a kid. There’s nothing I like more than the drums I don’t think.

The man smiled. This woman was funny, he thought. He had never seen a female jazz drummer, but he liked jazz.

What kind of girlfriend do you think you are? the matchmaker asked.

I have to think on that one, Carol replied.

Shoot whenever you're ready, I'm sure our listeners are curious, the matchmaker said.

Static filled the car for another few seconds and the man watched an elderly woman feed her Dachshund french fries in the car next to his.

I think I'm an alright girlfriend, Carol said, I don't think anyone is the best but I do what I can. I can cook dinner and listen to men talk. I can do other things too, like smile at the right times and laugh at jokes.

The matchmaker cut her off, Alright Carol let's find you your soulmate.

Up until this point the matchmaker's voice was personal, in a fake calm that was directed towards Carol's jolting responses. He sounded interested, tried at least. The pitch of his voice abruptly shifted as he addressed the listeners and said,

Alright you heard from her first, thank you Carol! We're now opening the lines now to hear from you and find this girl her perfect match.

The man debated on ordering another McMuffin from the drive thru window. He was hungry in a way he hadn't been in months, maybe years. He tried to remember and looked to his right, where the woman and her Dachshund had been. Their teal sedan had been replaced by two men in a pick-up truck who looked like they were in their mid-twenties, wearing matching orange polo-shirts, from some job or another. The square egg and the taste of bacon simmered between the man's molars. He wanted to eat. It was a strange sensation and he was enjoying it too much to question it. The man started his car and drove to the end of the line.

All right, caller number one, the matchmaker screeched, How about you tell me why Carol is the perfect woman for you.

I'm a human aphrodisiac, a man's voice said.

What was that, caller one? the matchmaker asked.

I drive women crazy, he continued, I can make your wildest desires a reality, you don't need to worry with me. I'm loyal and I know exactly what I'm doing.

Carol laughed nervously and didn't say anything.

The man grimaced to himself. He felt a twinge of forgotten nausea but pushed it down. It was embarrassment, he thought, his emotions, feelings manifested physically, he knew that. His doctor told him his stomach was scarred on the inside and he believed him. He felt bad for Carol. Her voice was quiet and stable, it was the sort of voice the man was drawn to. Not too self-deprecating but not overly confident. She must be questioning how she landed on this dating show in the first place. She was a sensible woman, he knew so. The man had sat in the parking lot for too long. He had taken too many sips of his vodka-coffee mix, and was too drunk to drive. He thought he should call the radio show, distract Carol and the matchmaker from the series of men telephoning the show. He would never do this sober, but he was drunk and not ready to go back to the house, to the panic of his wife and the stare of his in-laws.

The man dialed the number of the show on his phone with some trouble. He wasn't sure what he would say, or should say, but was confident he would find something to say. Carol was an easy woman to talk to. The man was selected to be on the show. The voice on the other side of the line told him he would be on the air in ten seconds.

The matchmaker's voice resounded against the man's eardrums but he ignored him.

Hi, Carol, he said.

Hi, she replied.

The man told her his name and took a sip of vodka from his coffee cup.

Would you like to hear something beautiful I learned the other day? the man asked her.

Carol laughed and said why not.

Maybe it's not beautiful, he said, but it's something.

I'm ready, Carol said.

I read about an experiment where a researcher made glasses that turned the entire world upside down. Everything he saw was the wrong way around, he had a hard time flipping light switches and drinking a glass of water. He wore these goggles for a week or two weeks, enough time to get used to them, he said.

The man paused and took another sip from the coffee cup. A family was now eating cheeseburgers in the car next to him. The day was passing him by.

Anyway, after wearing these goggles for however long, this guy, I mean researcher started to be able to do things normally again. Then one day, he woke up and everything was right side up. His vision, or eyes or something adapted to the upside-down glasses and flipped everything to seem normal again, the man continued.

Wow, Carol said.

The man imagined that she was smiling and continued,

It's just something to think about. That the body can do these things we take for granted. I never notice my eyes or realize what they do. But it is something.

It is something, Carol repeated.

There was a pause.

Wow you two, The Matchmaker broke the silence, You're making my job too easy for me.

They ignored him.

You're right, she said, we don't think about things too much. I was passing out keychains in Union Square last week and one of the guys who play chess there told me something crazy.

Tell me? the man asked.

He may have been on drugs, she said.

That's okay, the man said and laughed.

He told me about the Golden Record, she said.

It was something that sounded familiar to the man but he wasn't sure.

It was this record they sent into space, Carol continued, they put all these images of human life on it, music too.

For who to see? the man asked.

This guy told me aliens, but I don't know, Carol said.

The Matchmaker squeaked something out about aliens.

Anyway, she said, this record will probably outlive humans and the world too. It takes that long to make it to another universe.

I don't know if it will make it, the man said.

But it could, she said.

There was another pause.

They also chose not to include any images of war or conflict on the record. I don't think religion either, she said.

That's probably for the best, the man replied.

Is it? she asked.

I don't know, he said and laughed.

You never know what people are going to do, he said after a moment.

The rest of the conversation was a blur, but the man felt a strange amount of guilt for enjoying it while it lasted. He should be home, he thought. He should be better at helping and

doing the things that needed to be done. Instead, he was drunk in a McDonald's parking lot, avoiding the tightness he felt in his chest each time he looked at his wife and children. He wanted to be better, he thought, and tried some days. The man opened the door of his car and let it slam behind him. He walked into the outcropping of trees behind the parking lot and onto a wood-lined trail.

They found him half a day later. The evening had cooled the grass into a slightly damp stillness. The mosquitos had crawled up each and every limb of his sleeping body. They took turns, some lazily retreated while others took their places. It became a feeding frenzy of sorts. When he was eventually found, his skin was swollen in mounds. Some of the bugs were crunched between his knuckles and others still hovered above. His lips were swollen and eyes were rimmed in angry mounds. The wife grasped at his forearm, tried to shake him awake. Her hand met the oozing dots that coated his arm, red and expanding slowly like syrup.

She tried to lift him, her shoulders straining against his limp body. But, he fell backwards. All he could feel was the itch of the skin and his fingernails sunk in as if to hollow out the bites. Anger poured in and he clawed at the sores, they burned against him. He clawed his face, his arm, ankles until the taste of metallic spores formed around his lips. He fought against it, the crescents of his fingernails latched on and tore until that itch stopped.

The man woke five hours later, his arms wrapped in bandages that wound in tight, fleshy mounds. His eyes were swimming in the stark whiteness of the hospital bed. His vision moved to the IV in his vein, bruised and the brown stickiness of hydrogen peroxide. His wife was sitting next to him, her head torqued and folded to rest against the chair. He was almost sober, the fluids racing through his body had drained the vodka, leaving a foul taste in his throat. The wife's eyes fluttered in her sleep and he saw the gentleness that she harbored. Her eyes were lined with

wrinkles and soft bags of flesh. Shame inhabited him, it ground against his ribcage and lay there. He felt his eyes begin to burn. He fought against it, tried to bind it behind layers of wool, but it remained. His chest began to heave, heave against the weight that rested there, that smothered him. Tears pricked and slowly made their way, drifting past bug bites. It overwhelmed him, shaking his body until it folded into itself. It wouldn't stop, his labored breath strained against the silence and the smell of rusted metal in his nose. He cried until he woke his wife. She rose and stretched her arms around him, tried to squeeze the shame away, the sadness too.

Waiting for the Thaw

I. Meeting the Eye

On New Year's Eve, the Hudson and East rivers are cold and clogged with ice. Ice cutters sever the surface to allow for transport, for the barges of fireworks, too. Manhattan prepares itself for the throngs of tourists, the litter of streamers to cake the snow-encrusted sidewalks for days to come. The outer boroughs are quieter; some places are almost desolate in the deep of winter's chill. Wind pools off the Long Island sound and gathers between the ramshackle-sided houses of Rockaway and the southernmost reaches of Brooklyn. For some, joy seems to erupt from the sidewalks, the promise of the New Year thick in the slush and in the air. For others, the day is forgotten or despised entirely.

I found myself in the city for the first time in years. I wasn't sure how I had gotten there, perhaps looking for a friend, a transplant who had left the country for a cushy job, or a woman,

or both. The city felt washed in the same hues as the country during that time of the year, a kaleidoscope of various shades of gray, some rust at the edges, sometimes the teetering promise of blue sky. I came to the city in the sixth month of my absence, having grown tired of the daily stupor, the taste of watered down oblivion and the fear of running into the family I was trying to forget. I wondered if they had cleaned me out of their home in the same way you would wash the sheets after a guest had left, scrape their plate into the trash and empty the plastic ashtray from the porch step. Fondness is an indulgence I shy away from, it comes with memory, with regret and the sound of their voices. Alcohol tucked their voices behind my ears, muffled them, at least and allowed me to retreat into that comfortable sort of oblivion I had been chasing for so long. I looked down and saw a carbon-copy version of my own arms, swollen and red from the cold. I was a paper-cut-out in the most pathetic sense.

Unaccustomed to the sway of the subway I slumped forward and back, the air reverberated in front of me and fell in brief, metallic particles. My birthday had come and gone. Christmas had come, too. She had brought over a chicken pot pie. It was the kind they sell in the prepared food section of the grocery store. The plastic lid of the thing was misted and hot, she warmed it up in the microwave anyway.

I told her that, I was thankful, really thankful.

I know you are, she replied to me.

I'm doing better, I said.

I hope you are, she replied and looked away at the sink piled full of dishes, the grey sweatshirt slumped over the dining room chair.

They won't talk to me, I told her (I meant our children).

You have to give them time, she said, and keep trying. All you can do is keep trying.

I have been, I said.

We sat facing each other for another ten minutes, between us—a coffee table, slightly dusty, watermarks on the edges, behind her—our wedding photo and school photos of the children a few years back.

I ate a bite of the chicken pot pie after she left and threw the rest into the plastic trash can—I couldn't eat. The complexity and simplicity of that Christmas morning was hot in my ears and I watched an old woman across the subway car pet a small dog in a yellow-raincoat from inside her bag. Sometimes, I thought things might change, but things might also not change, that things may stay the same. The drinks tasted good and would always taste good—that was what I was sure of. And in the murky-half glow of the subway car, my alcohol-induced void became purely visceral, the squeal of the brakes and the monotonous tone overhead became indistinguishable from my thoughts, their distinctive tones humming over one another.

My vision was slightly holographic and I realized I didn't know where I was going, the train was above ground now and I knew enough to know I wasn't in Manhattan anymore. The car was mostly abandoned besides the old woman across from me and a young family towards the other end. Each time the doors opened and slammed closed again, the chill of the December air let me imagine her sinking down next to me, the sound of the girl and her brother's voices in my head. Sometimes, I closed my eyes, feeling a milky sort of warmth, of hope. In my mind I was able to move about space, my bones no longer strained against their fleshy canister, and I watched myself absolve the past and live a simple, full sort of life. I was playing hide-and-seek with myself, slipping into a shadowy half-self-version of myself I had been for so long, drunk and breathless at noon.

The next time I opened my eyes the train had stopped and the doors were ajar—it seemed they had been for some time, my breath was cold and lips were slightly trembling in the December chill. Outside I could hear the faint sound of waves, the final station on the line was open to the air and cars passed below. On the street, couples moved in hurried precision as I took a quick drink from the bottle I had forgotten in my coat pocket. It had been a mild winter, not much snow, only a stray mound here and there. Either way, the bright painted lettering of the boarded storefronts buzzed against the vague wash of color. I had only been to Coney Island once before, little pops and sparks flew and tried to construct a conscious memory, but all I could remember was the slight sensation of nausea and the smell of cooking oil. In late December, the park was fenced off and desolate. The Cyclone and Wonder Wheel rose strangely silent against the sky. No one seemed to notice I was going nowhere, rambling and without direction I felt the boardwalk beneath my loafers then took another sip from the bottle—trying to hush the chill, tuck it away.

The sand was slightly choked with ice, and I watched my legs stir beneath me, somewhere in the severance between day and night I faced the Atlantic—gray and tumultuous. The earth felt awash in a cold I had forgotten, a luminosity that was often so muddied by the buzzing of fluorescent. But here, in this strange abandoned amusement park, I was alone. I wandered down the beach as if I were a lost child, without direction or without the slightest inclination of my next footfall. Guilt, is an emotion I suffer often, regret too. I cry often and with purpose, lost in a life I sometimes struggle to recognize as my own.

Airplanes passed in succession overhead. I waved to them even though they would never see me. I looked towards a city I had forgotten, and thought of millions of people who never loved me. But, all I could think of was a family, a woman, the girl and her brother, pushed

behind layers of separation and my own self-created vacuity. This was regret, I decided and felt a cold rain hum behind my earlobes, beating into the grey, planer surface of the sand and of the sea. I felt the strangest desire to call them, to turn back towards the subway I had taken to this foreign place. Instead, I found myself closer to the surf, brief waves lapping my heels, gentle and welcoming. Something magnetic was reverberating beneath the surface, it was whole and it was warm. It told me it was warm like her, and of her children, my children. Somewhere, at that exact moment they spun in halfhearted circles on a frozen pond—blades leaving the mark of their presence on that place, until the next thaw when the ice would cave into itself and the marks of their skates become water and then air.

I will be gentle, I promise, it told me.

I told it that I believed it and took another step until I watched myself descend into the wave.

Snow begins to fall.

The water is cold, not as warm as it promised but it is beside me, and with me, and in me. In one way, I think, it reminds me of jumping off a dam once when I was a child. The suspension of the body in air between mossy ledge and water. That feels right. The bubbling pressure, too. Water that clings and caresses and courses through the ear channel to whisper melodies of the past and the unimaginable future. Eyes open and there is no rocky ledge below, no earth to ground my sputtering body, just weightless limbs against the rippling surface. Cold turns to warmth now and memory pools in. It pretends to be soft, but there is nothing soft about it.

My sister painted when we were children. She married a man named Frank who died from pancreatic cancer before he was fifty. I haven't seen her in two years.

The smell of baby powder and my mother's perfume.

Blue.

Blue is the color of my children's eyes, the color of my wife's bridesmaid dresses.

The harvest moon reflected on her shoulders as I proposed. I have never seen anything so beautiful.

The pay-phone rings.

Again, and again.

Carry children into the woods, point to falling leaves, laugh with them. Remember what it feels like to breathe.

Chicago in the winter and my father's silhouette shoveling the driveway before dawn.

Sinking a strike into the catcher's mitt, smelling clay in the fibers of my nose.

My father in the hospice wing, hugging his shoulders, feeling my weight against his own.

Blue.

The sensation of falling before sleep.

Waking to snow with her beside me and a slight chill in the air.

Our first house, wild blueberries in the backyard.

My sister.

A truckstop sunrise and the taste of pipe tobacco.

An aging man in tweed and corduroy.

Crying each time the plane lands over Lake Michigan.

Her hair lifted by spring wind, elbows deep in fresh soil, turning to me now, smiling, her arms fastening around me.

Swimming last summer, *the* last summer, watching the children's limbs become tinged beneath the surface of the lake. Rising to the surface now, smiling, laughing.

I wave back.

And it has only ever been them.

And them.

And now,

is blue.

II. Dusk is Another Story

"We hold our whispering selves delicately against distance.
The designer of this arrangement is ingenious."

The landscape of memory is sunk in a ripe blue, spores of trembling light fill in the empty spaces and a voice that sounds somewhat, but not entirely like his voice plays on repeat. Memory is deceitful but it is kind. Gloom is the enemy, even in the end. Waiting for center to thaw, for the years and distance to peel themselves away and provide clarity is fruitless. Expect nothing but prepare for anything. Here it comes.

In the third year of his absence his wife buys a ferry ticket and returns to their house on the island where they spent each summer before his decline. In a way, she thinks, it may be due catharsis, the return to that place, that *special* place may calm the rummaging she feels behind her skull, and curb the silent anger and distance of her children. She is unsure, but hopeful; either way the salt-licked wind feels good and she can feel the late-June sun on her shoulders. The ferry picks up speed—it is slow, and smells of diesel. Jet skis catch the waves that trail behind the boat—they appear as if flies in the cavernous expanse of sea. Her children cried the first time the steamship bellowed its departure of the Sound; this time they lean off the railing and her daughter laughs as the toddler next to her waves to the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard accompany the ferry as far as the lighthouse before turning back towards shallow water—one of the uniformed men waves back to the child on the ferry and it shrieks in delight. The ferry ride takes three hours. At some points, the Atlantic tosses the boat. It's gray surface is speckled with white-caps even in the calm and heat of the summer. The woman knows this, remembers her

children diving head first into the rain-strengthened waves of Wauwinet, the isolated tip of the island near their cottage, some years before. She remembers the anxiety she felt, imagining their limbs, though muscled and well-accustomed to the rough surf of the island, being tossed and spun beneath the waves, beating over themselves.

Thirty miles out to sea they begin to see the gradual curve of Nantucket Sound, and the woman holds back tears behind scratched sunglasses. The tears start as prickling in the back of her throat, then in her nose, finally in the wells surrounding her eyes. She cries for his absence, remembers the dark aviators, the way his hair—thinning in some points—would rise in the breeze of salt-slickened air. He would be laughing, she thought, pointing out the lighthouse to their children, before retreating into the belly of the ship to retrieve their car. She cries because he is no longer there and because her children lean away from her. They won't cry like her. They strain towards the lighthouse that welcomes them to land. Beachgoers who have wadded out to the sandbars which line the sound wave to the ferry, and this time her children wave back. Sometimes, she wishes they would cry, feel the brief calm she does afterwards, cheeks wet and black mounds of mascara dotting her palms. They are fine, she thinks. They are older now, but quiet. A jolt slows the ferry to what feels like a crawl and the shingled buildings of the town come into focus. Sailboats speckle the sound, straining against the ropes which anchor them, the wake of the ferry jostling them forward and backward. In that moment, her daughter turns to her and smiles.

Almost there, she says.

The mother smiles as a response and steps closer to them.

It's been a while, the mother says after a moment.

I still remember it, her daughter replies.

So do I, says the boy.

We used to cry every time the horn blew, the daughter says and laughs.

Her hair is sticky in the salt air and clings to the back of her neck, a faint sunburn appears on her shoulder blades and snakes around the thin-straps of her tank top.

Your dad used to have to cover your ears, the mother says and peels a strand of hair away from her daughter's back, matted into the thin metal of her necklace.

We know, the boy says after a moment.

We remember, the daughter says and pulls away from her mother's prying fingers. The strand of hair is still tangled in the necklace and the daughter pulls it, too hard perhaps, and leaves a few stray hairs wrapped around the chain.

The cottage is much like they remembered it, beach roses speckle the too-narrow driveway and branches scratch against the sides of the car. The island is wide around the middle, and carries the town, most of the docks and hotels there. Eventually, it tapers into a thin curve that almost loops into itself—speckled with wetlands and the sporadic house, the roads are dirt and wild rabbits flit into the brush almost constantly. The structure has two bedrooms, a small living room with a brick-clad fireplace and white-painted wood paneling. It is slightly elevated, hurricanes, when they come, drench the island in feet of water, washing crab traps ashore and flooding the houses on lower elevation.

The woman places a blue-checkered tablecloth on the table—slightly musty but clean enough. They have rented out the cottage for the past few years, fully furnished, take and use what you want, they told their renters. In high season they made money; tourists flooded the island, and with all the rentals in town filled, retreated to quiet bluffs of Wauwinet and into their cottage. She busies herself, yanking open windows and shaking the welcome mat. On the front

porch, anywhere in the house, she can smell the ocean and hear the waves crash into themselves time and time again. In the beginning the noise is somewhat abrasive to the silence, but eventually it becomes the silence. She is happy to be here. There is a calmness, a sadness too—but it is only slight. The cottage feels warm in the midday sun and her children are making sandwiches in the galley kitchen. She has come here to do something, and is ready to do it, almost. This was his favorite place after all, the place they danced to jazz across hardwoods and slept in the soft ebb and flow of the belly of the Atlantic. It is a place without time, that will always belong to him, and the half-lit grainy memory of him.

After a week they have become accustomed to the routine of their days, the welcomed listlessness and constant movement of the tide. Some days they venture into town, only to get groceries or ice cream. But most days they spend on the forgotten curve of their beach, the sea grass and roses grow amuck, tangle into one another and spill onto the road. They swim and read and grow a deeper shade of tan, hair lightening in the sun. The mother feels a closeness to her children, calm has saturated the angst of their bones. They laugh and so does she. Each night when she falls asleep in a white nightgown she thinks to herself that this must be helping.

The mother rises before dawn and finds herself in the kitchen facing the half closet where *he* is. Now, she thinks, is the best time as any. The air is light and dawn is beginning to peel the tendrils of night away. It was going to be a hot day, moisture simmers beneath the surface, a heat that builds up as if it were a fever, trapped inside a glass shell—gathers in brows and dampens hair. She puts *him* into her purse and walks onto the beach. Silence, a space between the dunes and the tall grass shifts with the wind, moving as if a silken whole. The beach is isolated and the waves are grey and angry in high-tide. Hissing and spitting they lay flat down onto the miniscule particles of drenched sand before curling back into themselves.

She sits, shorts becoming slightly damp in the sand. Before she realizes it, she is waiting for him to come striding through the dunes, blue shirt blown against his chest, arms tan and waving. The sand is light almost, and feels oddly buoyant. Each fistful exposes a darker shade and she is clawing at it. The sides of the hole keep falling in and so is she, hair falling into her eyes. The hole grows and grows until the seawater leaks in on one side and she is laying his ashes into it, smoothing the surface over with sand—not allowing the Atlantic to claim him, at least not yet. The mother clings to that place, the vacuity of memory, a knot forming as she watches the dawn and the unwavering horizon.

Why did you have to leave? she asks the sand.

The sand doesn't reply.

I wish you hadn't, she says.

The tail-end of a wave skims her fingertips.

I really, really wish you hadn't, she says again.

She presses a stray shell, a thin piece of driftwood into the mound. Smoothing over the disturbance to the natural slope of the earth, she watches her hands before her. Peculiarly, she doesn't cry and instead, allows the light of the sun simmer between her eyelids. And the light, she thinks, is his, is his, is his.

I thought you might like to be here, she says to the sand again and stands upright, backbone uncurling and popping into place.

I hope you do, she says and reaches down, hands skimming the surface of the sand.

In that moment she looks up as a wave crashes into her—drenching her thin sweater, pulling her hair around her neck and leaving her sputtering in the dawn light. Shades of light grey, white, and some blue reflect in the sea before her, shoulders shivering in the startling gust

of seawater. The mound beneath her feet is flattened, the shell and stray driftwood are sucked back into the sea. She pulls the sweater away from her skin, and wrings it, beads of moisture snake between her fingers.

Facing the dawn, the mother begins to laugh, laugh at her soaked clothes and the shock of the ocean water. The feeling begins in her toes and works its way through her limbs, an uncontrollable laughter that disturbs the silence of the early morning and the repeated roll of the ocean. Somewhere overhead a gull calls and she makes her way through the dunes, a lightness in her limbs and the first strains of sun warming her scalp.

Her children meet her at the door to the cottage.

Where were you? her son asks.

Watching the sunrise, the mother replies between heaving laughter.

Her daughter begins to laugh too.

Why are you all wet? she asks her mother.

I wish I knew, the mother replies.

Don't get me wet, the daughter laugh-shrieks and runs across the living room.

The mother throws the sopping, balled-up sweater in her general direction. It splats to the ground before the fireplace.

They laugh for a few more minutes. The boy is the first to stop.

Look at what she found, her boy says and gestures to his sister.

They sit on the threadbare couch. The mother has peeled off her drenched clothing and has put on a red-polka-dot bathing suit, a towel wrapped around her head. The son presses play and the ancient VHS begins to sputter.

In pixelated form the mother and her daughter are curled beneath a rainbow beach umbrella. The daughter is a toddler, thighs and knees fat and coated with sand. The boy is closer to the waves. Plastic beach toys litter the sand around him. He carries plastic pail after plastic pail of ocean water into the sand and pours them into buckets, and windmills. The camera zooms onto the face of the girl—her toddler hair is almost iridescent in the sun and she stands shakily, looking in the general direction of the sea.

Then they hear his voice.

Here comes that gull again, the father says, I think he likes you.

The toddler laughs and tumbles onto the towel.

His voice is instantaneously familiar, and yet unfamiliar at the same time. The separation of time, of years without it, has let them forget the sweeping tones that were so distinctively his.

The camera cuts out and in again. This time to the crude outline of the man and children in the sunset. The mother is filming, unaccustomed to it, the light is dark and their forms are barely distinguishable.

How do I zoom this thing? she asks.

It's one knob or the other, he replies.

I think I got it, she says and laughs.

Look at Mommy-hay go, the father says and points towards the camera.

The image is focused now, sunset leaving an orange glow to wash across their faces, the girl clings to her father, a bag of Goldfish in one hand, his hair in the other. The boy crouches on his knee, pointing to the ocean. They are laughing, ponderous, hopeful. In this preserved sliver of memory, their childish limbs and minds are consumed by the sea and by the body of their father who holds them. The mother continues to zoom, across their faces, slightly blurry but all the time

clear—they are happy and warm in the failing sunlight. His eyes catch the camera lens for a moment longer than his children. He raises one arm to wave and the camera shudders as a reply.

We have to get back to the house and get dinner going, Charlie, the mother's voice says from behind the camera.

He looks up and smiles at her.

We'll come back tomorrow, he says to his children.

They begin to protest. The sea is magnetic and it before them and surrounds them and breathes into them.

Your clothes are wet and the sun is setting, he says and points towards the sun, see—there is goes.