Spell for the Lost

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Invocation
This is a spell for the lost. It is a divination of location, a specific and yet also undefined location: specifically, the location which is home, safety, comfort. It is a spell for finding home, for bringing the lost out of the woods. It is for those who look at the world and see a hallucinatory surrounding, an alien surrounding, for those who at home feel out of place, and know then, that something is missing still.

Imagine that you are driving, at night - when the lines of the road are fluorescent and the lights of passing cars are single pinpoints. When a car passes you by, and its light shines through your windshield, and you are briefly both illuminated, but still both made invisible by passing speed and tinted glass. There is in this moment a shared communication between drivers, a transference of light, and an acknowledgement of presence. You do not know the other driver, as surely as they do not know you.

Imagine that I am driving past. What is most important is that I do not know you. We are briefly blinded, high beams on, a flash of communication in an anonymous darkness. We may wonder who the other driver was, as we continue into the tapestry of street and stop lights ahead. We may wonder what they were thinking, and bound as we are by speed, space and time together, we will never know. However, we will have shared a transference of light.

When I mention the specter of a white truck ripping down a highway, you know it not to be real. A truck potentially exists somewhere, but the truck is surely gone, disassembled into words on a page. But as I conjure this truck, and you conjure this truck, this moment of acceleration, it is reborn. There are two points of light in a night, both imagining an imaginary vehicle. This communication makes it real, ethereal, but briefly re-corporated, as pure as it first came into words, from whatever imagined space it existed in just before.

As you read these words, my words, the barrier between our thoughts is shattered.
Transmutation 1: spiral into straight line

The first gesture will be entirely outside of ourselves. A space must be created for the communication to manifest, a ritual space. All that is needed is this empty space, your presence, and your knowledge of mine, elsewhere - similarly placed. Open a window, and notice the change in pressure, the slight breeze. Then notice, first of all, the sense of being accompanied; you are no longer alone. Dreams or spirits, I do not know what to call them.

Notice how they land, like birds, and with their arrival the room settles. Maybe a door closes from the changing air. Maybe the room simply becomes warm and still again. Now focus on our space, which is both empty and full, and join, as we spiral inward, through the minds of the spirit-dreams. We are flitting, searching to influence the ensnared bodies we find within. We are searching for three bodies, one stolen, one lost, and one a mother, separated from her children. We will find ourselves unable to move them, still alone, outside the dream.

Hold out your arms. Reach into the space, which was your space, and sense how it is now occupied. Occupied by words, occupied by roaming, occupied by the lost. Sense how even the most familiar of places can be twisted into the most foreign.
A boy has a phobia of dirty sinks, he has a phobia of repeated actions. He places porcelain plates in soldier’s lines, dishwater marching down their expressionless faces. At times he feels the walls are watching him; he feels how white walls feel as they sweat in the summertime. The dishwater churns around the boy’s hands, the sponge is starting to smell of mold, his yellow gloves glow in the evening sunlight and the wind from a fan across the room is unnatural in the summer heat. Holding his breath he plunges back below the surface.

Old couches all look the same, all tread the same lonely paths to meet at a shapeless grey, where the same sorts of old men splay drunkenly across their cushions. One such old man sits with his legs spread open, his cargo shorts flap in the breeze, exuding a backwater luxury. He finds his words while digging for a lost lucky penny between the cushions:

The boy stays silent. “You’re not very good at doing dishes are you?”

The boy stacks clean plates, plate after plate, on the countertop; the drying rack is full. He keeps stacking them until the bottom dishes threaten to crack under the weight of the dishes stacked atop them. He agrees: he’s not very good at doing dishes. He mostly lets the water run over the plates, trying not to submerge them for fear of what might bubble back out. What would a sink trade for a plate? - rotten food - a half drowned wasp - a shard of broken glass?

“Jesus christ, How many plates do you need?” the boy asks.

The man’s reply gets chopped by the whirring blades of the fan and echoes around the room. The boy starts a new pile on the floor, and the room continues to fill with dishes.
I

I can describe these days as a slideshow. Like the imprint of bright snow on the backs of my eyelids, like the fluttering afterburn of a pale face. As fragile as my body is, made so by abrasions, sunburns, frostbite… the mountains seem more fragile still. The porcelain perfect slabs of ice gleam down at me. When I was a child I would stare at the sun, cross legged and waiting; I would stare into flashlights, waiting. There was something in the way the light condensed, thickened in the center, as though shadow, as though I could see the curve of the sun’s body, distinguish it from its rays. Light moving slow, light that was heavier than before, as though sinking, pushing through. Somehow I thought this ceaseless snow would be soft, that I would find an endless bed to rest in, to dissipate in. These mountains which encircle me, as though I were trapped in a teacup. These mountain which splinter like china. The fragile avalanches which howl - what anguished beast is out in these mountains whose voice is so low as to be the sibling of thunder? Who after heavy snowfall screams in such sudden pain?

Another day walking after so many days walking. Where I am going becomes more abstract. Perhaps I am not going at all but watching, watching the arc of the sun, the peace and torment of the winter peaks. No! I am in motion, leaving, walking forward. Each day is more a burden, my feet raw with cold and trench-foot. What was a march is a crippled trudge, into light, into gloss light and snow.

My sister died in an avalanche, trauma to her head - bludgeoned by a pine ripped from the ground. I used to ask if I was looking for her, but I see nothing of her. The burns underneath my eyelids never coalesce into her face. No, I haven’t imagined her face once. I confess this, a confession to cease my interrogation by a deaf landscape. No, I haven’t seen my sister. There is no sister out here. Only that point, where the light grows lethargic, dampens, coagulates. What lures me is always behind the next ridgeline. At first I walked in a line towards that point, closing my eyes and moving forward, retina burns revealing a map reflected by the snow. When I drew no nearer to the center I reconsidered, started walking in wide circles, nighttime storms covering up my tracks, the ground forward and backward unmarked. And these circles, at first they felt like madness, snow blindness, hypothermia. They were not madness.

I am circulating, closer, closer every day, and closer to what?

The day they went looking for my sister they brought avalanche beacons and dogs. The patrol with beacons would spiral in, slowly, the dogs bounding through the snow. Eventually they all converged, the men’s circles and dog’s wild lines. All lines pointed towards my sister. And they dug, and they found her too late. No, I will not find my sister’s body, I am sure of that. I will not find my family; I can not properly tell if I ever had a family, solely the lone memory of a missing sister.

The sunsets out here turn the entire world pink, pink like a rose. Another day passes but for that brief moment before night, the mountains are no longer impassive, no longer discarded dishes dripping in endless lines, instead there is the curious fragility of a rose petal, plucked between fingers. This tundra could almost be aromatic, could have veins pumping water beneath its surface, could be blooming to greet the setting sun.
Baptism was her first drowning, the priest slipped while placing her in the holy water and she cracked her newborn head on the porcelain basin. The second was in the summer of her senior year at Lake Superior. The third was when she fell asleep while taking a bath two weeks before the present moment. It was a decadent bath, with rose scented bubbles and four candles placed at the cardinal points of the tub.

Her boyfriend at the time had come in to bring her prosecco and had to resuscitate her himself. She had broken it off with him not much later; she figured that there are some shames a person should never be able to hold over someone else. A saved life was one of them. Shortly after kicking him out of the apartment she received the first paid vacation time of her life. The way she sees it, as she crouches over an atlas wondering where to travel first, the world has a way of moving in circles. People move in circles, toy trains on toy train tracks, and sometimes their tracks overlap. During this overlap you share a space, then the rest of the time it’s waiting for the whole circumference to come back around again. When one element of life goes motoring off, another one comes rumbling into town.

Now, she taps the atlas, where can she travel that there is no chance of drowning? Treading her finger around the perimeter of Utah her mind wanders to the prints of Piranesi. She remembers his imagined prisons, impossible prisons, with staircases leading nowhere, and structural arches that held no weight. She remembers the guidebook to ancient Rome, its depictions of apocalyptic decay. The tourists of the 1700s had been convinced to see Rome by these images, and were outraged when they proved to be fictitious. For her everything is a little bit like Piranesi’s Rome: the tragic combination of good advertising and high expectations. Utah is probably just like Piranesi’s Rome. Her errant finger traces a road, as if by magnetism or railway cog, to a name on the map: The Garden of the Gods.

“Hello?” she calls into an empty home. [From the fores she hears the tinsel sound of a dish cracking].
How strange to be in this place. I once so casually called it my childhood home, this place where surely I had been a stranger to me. The arrangement of posters on the walls, the bins of toys stored in the closet, the nostalgic musk, all unrecognizable. Not belonging to somebody else, but to nobody, as though these memories had been abandoned, a forgotten archipelago. It is related to the feeling of being trapped in open rooms, when a paranoia strikes suddenly, despite the open windows and doors. The presence of walls becomes constrictive.

I do not trust this place. I do not trust it. I am told I played in this yard, slept in this bed, but I do not trust it. If I had been here, there would be an imprint, I would have left something of myself behind. I would have become somewhat part of the room, isolated in it, always a lonely child reaching out. Out of myself and out of this space, surely I would have left myself some sign, some warning: you are here, you have come home. Something of myself in the tin soldiers in wooden boxes, video game cartridges, posters of rock and roll heroes, stuffed animals with stranger’s eyes. Surely I would have stretched into these toys, holding them in my child’s hands, hands that don’t look so different now, I must have made these toys mine.

I am not amnesiac; I can recognize that much. Certainly I walked through this doorway here, sat atop the landing here on my ninth birthday, contemplated the capacity of that number, recognized it as the point from which I would have to be, completely, lucidly, until there was nothing left for me to be.

When I left this place some years ago, I was a stranded sailor, an anonymous stretch of sand. I said goodbye knowing that I would never return, knowing that if I did return the anonymity of the landscape would consume my memory of the place. I set sail, sailed into years of doldrums. Thus, marooned in an oceanic eddy, I scrapped the ship, burnt the sails, and rowed back home.
By night, from the tallest building in a coastal city, visitors can come and look over the edge. A canvas of neon lights meets them, patrolled by speeding cars. Looking toward the sky, it looks as though the lights of the city mimic the lines of the constellations, as though there were roads in the sky and the outlines of ancient warriors in the city grid.

When the moon sets, a reflection shimmers across the city: the moon’s light reflected on the flanks of dark glass buildings.

When the sun rises, the tower is closed for cleaning, but the cleaners watch red pollution bathe the city turning the streets to arteries.

When the tower opens again the people look over the roof and drop pennies on the concrete, or try to drop them on people passing below.

From this height all of the pedestrians are visibly people, yet they wear a shroud of anonymity, enacted by the vertical distance. To the viewers looking over, they seem uncannily familiar, and the tourists turn to each other and wonder: have they seen these people walking below before? Do they know them, or are their movements a map of déjà vu, forgotten memories, or echoes from things yet to come?

At 12:00 on the 15th of July, a woman walks down an avenue wearing a sunflower-yellow dress, and by chance, every viewer on the roof is drawn to her promenade.
III

I wake from a dream of subway stations to a desert landscape. It is still night, the time when the desert is most alive, owls, frogs, ringtail cats. I try to focus briefly, on the last sunset I saw.

I pinch my eyes closed and see only the veins beneath my eyelids.

It's a hunter's moon tonight. If there were game, I would be a predator. If I were a predator I would chase the beast, my bare feet crushing the thin eggshell crust of the desert floor, my claws a rifle, my fangs a bullet. The stag would stumble, collapse, and I would feast on venison!

On these full moon nights, I look out and see the mesas and spires in the distance, like hunchbacks, or great behemoths resting on their pilgrimage from forgotten past to imagined future.

Midnight mastodon, what secrets do you hold in your stone belly? What is atop those mesas, what corridors wind through their sandstone depths? I was once lied to about this landscape. Told that the people here ate only thorns, that entire mountains turned to sand overnight, that mirages wriggled through the air like silverfish - confounding travelers that drank only from cactuses. The only myth that held true is that the desert blooms at night. If I had a lover, or had a mother still, I would surely write them about the curious flowers that open their petals only for the light of the moon.

I climb upward and look out, to see what is next, and see the sunrise. Still night, time is wrong, but the light is brilliant, unmistakable even. I walk towards it, becoming more parched with each step.

Finally a strangeness, an impossibility I can latch onto and claim, this is not real, none of this has come to pass, I just haven’t woken up yet. Not yet, not once. As I approach: the mirage explains itself: a giant sunflower, a skyscraper, catching the light of the moon. How it grows here I cannot imagine. Perhaps it is what drains this landscape. Placing my hand upon its trunk, I swallow. The impossibility of its growth explained: it is plastic. Cold and unnaturally smooth, the dew is just starting to run down its plastic skin. The strangeness of the landscape is dwarfed by the strangeness of this object, and I am swimming in its impossibility. Swimming, treading water really. Is time passing here? Is it morning yet, or still night? I am walking, dancing, jumping, but is the ground passing beneath my feet, or am I feeble, suspended and kicking in mid air, the mime of a walking man?
She gasps pulling her girlfriend into her chest. Their lips locked she can feel the layers of saliva mixing together. Her thighs tighten and ache, an excitement building tension in her chest, clotting in the bowl of her collarbone. She pulls on her lover’s hair, pushing the other woman’s head sideways. Her feet tingle with the loss of blood and her body opens up, a patient and cavernous mouth. Her girlfriend crawls forward; she latches her arms and legs around the crawling woman’s back, devouring her. Clawing into her back she can feel the skin abrading at the touch, building beneath her fingernails.

[She listens to her ears ring. Her revery is breached by the image of cattle driven forward, forward through the shining canal of a slaughterhouse, bleating: the smell of blood in her nose. She pulls the other closer to her.]

Her lover looks at her kindly, wondering why her grip has softened, what sort of distance is accumulating behind her eyes? She makes eye contact for a moment, before the other leans upward and yanks down, collapsing. The pin and needle sensation in her feet spreads upwards to her legs. She kicks her foot in frustration, trying to shake the tingling, but it only spreads, her entire body prickled by what feels like a swarm of drugged bees. Her throat catches in panic, she cannot breathe. Her lover frowns at her, then tries to lift her body, yet her body moves as though her joints were caulked with mortar. She whimpers at the cramps that are running up her body in waves. Toppling over onto the floor she lands on her elbows, back arched towards the ceiling. Her teeth ache at the seams where they meet her gum, and her throat is dry. Her eyes sting, desiccating and reddening, leaden in their sockets. Her girlfriend shouts, struggling to pull her back onto the bed. She can sense the increased gravity of her own body, and knows that she has become too heavy to lift. She presses her hand into the carpeted floor, feeling the texture of rough wood rather than softness. Coughing, some brick red sand falls from her mouth, perfectly dry.

She heaves again, dry and crushed leaves and petals pouring out from between her chalked teeth. She heaves until she topples into a fetal position, her jaw clenched and hardened. Hands against her belly, convulsing and contracting, she curls like a crushed insect.
I knew it immediately, from its eyes, eyes which I had seen in dreams, from its long hands, hanging limp at its side. It is speaking to my mother, as though nothing is wrong, in the grocery store. Staring at me. How my mother was fooled into thinking that its words were for her, that it spoke only of fresh produce, when it would not move its eyes an inch for fear of losing track of me. When these words dripped so clearly with the poison of a feverish mind. I know you from the nighttime, I wanted to say, I know you from my sleep, from before I was born, when my night was endless and your life fed on my lifelessness. You are when I am not. But I see you now, in the day with me, and I know that one of us is running out of time.

Then of course, like all the venomous creatures, spiders, snakes, scorpions alike, it vanished, hid. Walking behind a pile of cantaloupe, it never came back out. Mr. Smith was asking after your pet iguana, my mother said. No, no, no. No I wanted scream, but I said it under my breath, just as I say it now: my eyes are closed, my head is bobbing, no, no, no no. I was afraid, my mouth stone dry and words choked.

The next time I saw it was in an abandoned farm. In the building where they kept the cattle, among the large troughs, the machines that held their bodies in place for milking. All gone to rust. This time it did not have a body, yet I could feel it in the walls of that building, feel it in the dust falling from the ceiling, the hay clinging to the floor - it had surrounded me, was watching me with predatory intent. I turned to the man who was exploring the building with me. Maybe he was a lover, back then. Placed my hand on his shoulder and drew my thumb softly down his arm. I looked into his eyes, deep brown and almandine, red from exhaustion. He wet his lips with his tongue, his lips which seemed all the more red for how gaunt his face had become, he wasn’t eating enough, had been drinking too much. Instead of kissing him I whispered: we have to leave. And thank him, thank him, whoever he was, he listened.

And I feel it now, feel it coming closer. Under the carpet, under the whitewash chips on the ceiling. When I look in the mirror I see something of it in my eyes. It is coiling like a snake, but I will crush its spine. It is preparing to strike and we are traveling on intersecting vectors. Me - this creature, wherever I am, I am motionless - wherever it is, it is impossibly fast.
Transmutation 2: pierced circle, rupturing

Now! look outward, at the horizon line. If you are lost in buildings or trees know, that after wandering through this maze of pillars, the horizon line lies, like a needle through a balloon. Take in the space outside, and know, these are not your people, these are not your places. As surely familiar as everything feels, it will always be alien to you, separate from you. You are two hanging eyes looking outward at a world in which you have arrived too late. It is formed. But that horizon, if only you could see past it, it feels as though something would be punctured, does it not? Something that, with its seal broken, would come pouring in. Pick up an object, a book, a ball, and drop it. Does it not feel so impossible that it could get stuck in midair, that it could fall through the floor into another place. Drop it again. How stable is that series of events? Book to hand, to book to air, to book to floor. What would it take for that space to collapse? It’s not that tightly knit at all…

With me, hand in hand, no longer alone, we let ourselves drop.
Outside of a cafe sits a young woman avoiding the gaze of a young man. There is nothing particularly striking about her, most who see her don’t notice her and those who do rarely remember her. Sometimes they are left with the memory of someone having been present, but memory stretches its skin over her face; nameless she disappears. Of course the boy wants her to notice him. She busies herself stirring her coffee, which has grown thick and lethargic. Her spoon scrapes along porcelain walls. Pulling out a chair the young man asks if he can sit.

She gestures for him to join her before lounging back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest. He is a wild looking boy, and uncomfortable, fidgeting with his hands and hair, picking at his half-beard. They both pause. She examines the overlapping coffee stains on the surface of the table. She traces their circles with her finger, suddenly hyper-aware of three things: One the furrow her tracing finger leaves in the gloss sheen of the table, two the length of her index fingernail, and three the lipstick stained crack on the rim of her coffee cup. She sighs, settling deeper into her chair.

"I’m bored. Tell me something interesting."

"I’ve been thinking about projection, slides specifically. I’ve been thinking about how the projection of a slide, it’s not the real thing, it’s not the slide itself. But it’s larger, fuller, somehow more real. I’ve been thinking about life, thinking that maybe we’re just walking in a projected image."

"I’ll tell you what I think about projection. I think that when you look at me you aren’t looking at me. You’re looking at some projection on me, maybe it’s cleopatra, maybe it’s calypso, maybe it’s a muse. But you’re looking at this legendary overlay, and the light just passes right through me."

They sit in a silence that is not entirely hostile, and both imagine a sequence of two images:

[First, both of them individually see an image of violence, an ankle being punctured repeatedly. Then a damp wind causes both of them to shiver. Finally they experience a warmth, that is truly warming, but feels somehow misplaced.]

Standing up, the boy gathers a small parcel of papers he had set down on the table.

"I should go"

For a moment, she is almost sad, she realizes that this chance encounter is almost over. She is suddenly lost, alone; she knows she will never return to this moment. "You should go."

She returns to examining the fracture on the rim of her coffee-cup.
I

What had been a troubling night broke into an equally troubling morning. My eyes are adjusting to a total absence of morning light. Instead, the boundaries of what appears to be the interior of a cube are lit by a sourceless pallor. Six companions, discernibly human, but otherwise shrouded by the strange light, slowly wake. They stretch toward an expected light, a light which should be shining through the windows they fell asleep next to. The windows are missing; the morning light is missing. They murmur, waking, thrashing at absent covers, then falling still, realizing that the pallor around them stuck, would not simply be kicked away. Yet these sleepers never burst into panic, instead winding back down toward entropy. They slump, backs against the wall, a conclave of the lost.

At first we speak with measured calm, but introductions seem impossible to make. When asked to describe myself, I find there is nothing to tell. For my companions, the effect seems to be the same. What is there to say in this place? From their silhouettes I can place some of my companions; an older man, certainly is speaking now. He is fatigued and slurs his speech; his words eventually sputter into quiet.

A child? strikes the first clear bell of fear, asks: where am I? We cannot answer, and she begins to cry.

I try to place where we are; to calm her, or to calm myself I do not know. I press my ear to the floor, which is quiet and stone. Similarly the others feign searching, circling the box, some crawling, others probing the corners of the ceiling with their fingertips.

It is a woman? who makes a discovery. She had been clutching her head for some time, before she bends forward and vomits. I feel seasick she says, and we all mutter agreement. She stands, freezes in the middle of the room, her arms held out, sensing the air. We are bobbing, she says. We are, this cube, prison, is moving through something, what, water, air, a sea of grasping hands?

I am captured. My blood pounding search fades into nausea. I am not searching, but being dragged. It is the drift of fate dragging me into the jaws of the creature I see when I close my eyes.

I do not sleep, do not dream, do not imagine myself elsewhere, but my companions tell me of their dreams, dreams which they say become more vivid with each repetition. I do not dream, have not dreamed in some time, not since that time so long ago, since when I saw this being, which was then just a shadow falling on a stranger’s face in the grocery store. My companion’s descriptions of their dreams become less exact, more consumed by an unspeakable vividity, each repetition dragged further beyond what language can tell. The tallest of my companions is the first to fall entirely silent. We are traveling, I know. The air is warmer, more humid, the cell walls become tacky during what must be morning, with what must be morning condensation. It was cold in the maybe-night before, and our breath would turn to frost. It is getting warmer outside.

There is a spiderweb of cracks forming between us all, we slip into silences, the ends of which grow increasingly deep, impossibly long.

The one who claims to be the oldest of us tells me that they all dreamed of me during the last sleep. Tells me I was somewhere happy, free. The elder cups my hands between hands soft with wrinkles, hands so warm in this tepid cell.

Eventually my companions no longer tell me of their dreams. It is as though we have come too close to the source of these dreams, that they have all been silenced by whatever brilliance plays behind their shut eyelids. My companions no longer look at each other, instead facing apart, staring outward at whatever has passed, just past sleep and through these walls.
In the summer he is a firewatcher, he keeps his eye on the horizon. He suspects he is one of the last firewatchers, and certainly one of the last firewatchers in the Rockies.

The morning is brisk with the first hints of autumn, the leaves of the scrub oak are starting to yellow at the tips and the indian paintbrush are blooming. In the valley, the tops of the trees are reddening. From his cabin on the mountainside, he thinks that these valley trees look singed along the tops, as though a great heat from the sun burnt their leaves rather than the approaching cold. The indian paintbrush blooming red around his cabin - the char from his proximity to the sun.

He is counting the days until he can unbury his skis - the first snow can’t be far. Inside, a woman slightly older than him reads a book, sitting in a corner facing towards the valley view. He comes indoors and asks her what she is reading. "Melville" she says.

He sets a coffee boiler on the stove and loads some firewood into its open front then sits next to her flipping through a small guidebook. "We’ll have to ski that north ridge this winter." "How many more seasons do you think we’ll have up here?"

“How so?”

“Firewatchers are becoming obsolete, pretty soon they’ll have enough satellite coverage that they’ll be able to spot the fires all the way up in space.”

“They’ll still need us for avalanche control in the winters. Can’t have the highway getting buried by some big slide.”

He stands up and walks over to the window, leaning slightly on the sill, gazing up towards the sky. He imagines he can see the satellites twinkling and orbiting above him. Maybe they’re the ones singeing the trees. Moving his gaze down a few inches he can see the town at the head of the valley below, the cars roofs reflecting satellites above. With a sense of vertigo, he walks from the window and turns off first a radio humming rock and roll classics, and second his cell phone.

In the winter he works in avalanche control. He stays in the same cabin with the same woman and watches the same mountains. He is asleep upstairs, a fire burning in the woodstove. The cabin smells pleasantly of smoke and the mountains are sleeping under a clear night after fresh snow. Despite the warmth of the cabin, he wakes up cold, and reaches across the bed to find it empty. He stands up, walks downstairs, the house still empty. Pulling on a coat and snow boots he walks outside, impeded at first by a drift of snow against the door. The storm broken, and the moon full, the snow sparkles gently in the night. He wanders out into it calling her name and the mountains eat his voice. He walks uphill, until he sees a figure standing at a saddle. He runs up behind her and hugs her.

She is sleeping. Shivering she awakens.

[She says, "Did you see the whale? I think I saw a whale."]

The weight of the mountains spirals down on him; from above, they are a single spec in the swath of the moonlit bowl.
II

I am alone again, but free. The cell split open and the moving sand which drags it ends at this point, a point which I recognize as where the great sunflower once grew, if I can describe it with a word like "grow." The sunflower is gone, but here is the place. My companions disappeared long ago. It is as though they reached outside of themselves, gazed so intently through the walls of their prison that they passed through them, or simply became so absorbed in their visions, in thought, that they ceased to have bodies at all. I walk outward from that point in the dunes where once a flower grew. I know now that I am not searching, pushing forward, but instead am being pulled, lured. Moving forward may be the only gesture that I truly understand, that is a complete part of me, and I am robbed even of that.

In the desert I find a wall, a wall made of dark material, which dampens light, a wall which stretches toward the sky. But to call it a wall is perhaps wrong, for it implies purpose, defines it. Definitions will not save me here, before this black wall on a flat plane. When I see the monolith, I know it is circular, that I am caged. Whatever I am, whoever I am, this structure is my opposite. I can know it only as the spherical limit of my physical self, that which I cannot climb, that which I will never walk around.

This is the wall that punctures the world, the path that I would walk in eternity, until I slip into myself, cave in, collapse.

I sit in defiance, I will walk no farther, I refuse to wander into the maw of this creature, refuse to be dragged to its nest. Let it abandon me in an endless desert, cage me, drive me mad with repeated days and endless roads. I will not lose my mind, I will not lose my body, for this body is its anathema. As I am physical, it is not. It can be no more than a yearning, a hunger, as I stand here, human.

The stars in the sky are a window into space; it is so clear out here. The sun lights the rocks in the evening, and the sand is cool beneath my feet. I could be happy here.

A violent tugging rips at my arms as though I am bound at the wrists. You will not take me like this, a fish on a line, gasping for breath.

You cannot tear me from this place, my feet are ground into the sand, and my feet are like roots. I shout at the monolith, I scream, and the wall echoes sound back at me.

I am struck with a harpoon, a sharp piercing splits my stomach, but my hands cradle unbroken skin, my gut unruptured. I will not be ripped from this point, I am growing into this landscape and will flourish here. This creature, whatever it is, wherever it is becoming from, will have to tear this desert in half to harvest me. I wonder then, unbidden, an other’s thought, in the tone of a taunt,

[where did you pluck that sunflower from?]

What happened when the sunset mountains closed their pink petals. Did they shut their buds, or did they wilt and decay, at first skeletal, then indistinguishable from sand; the same sand which whips around me. I cling to myself, as though clutching a lover above a precipice, to keep them from slipping, out of my arms, away.
A maid is walking down a hotel hallway in a state of introspection. He is thinking about his childhood. The phrase “I want to go home” repeats in his head, a mantra. He opens the door to a hotel room he knows to be empty, goes past the bed he dressed earlier, and drags a chair upholstered in floral teal to the window. He twists the shades letting in slats of light from a street-lamp outside. To the traffic drone he naps and remembers.

When he was a boy, he had a large dog with long black hair. He remembers how he had walked with the dog through the forest of his youth, how once he had come upon a snake camouflaged in the grass. He picked up the snake and showed it to the dog, its twisting exaggerated by the slowness of its midair contortions. The dog approached it, sniffing. The boy half expected the dog to snatch the snake from his hand, so he withdrew it, yet returned it when the dog’s pricked ears signaled interest. As he offered the snake forward, it struck, biting the dog’s nose. The dog yelped, betrayed by the boy’s curious gift.

The maid taps the arm of his chair before standing up and returning to the hall. He can’t remember if the hallway was as long as it is now. Walking down the rows of doors, he comes upon one marked with a roman numeral. Surely, that wasn’t there before. It is cracked and he can hear a deep-throated moan flutter through the opening. His curiosity bests him; he presses his hand into the green wood of the door and enters. Inside, on an otherwise undisturbed bed lies a body covered in moths. They settle and rise from the body, collecting most densely around its groin, pausing to probe at a veneer of sweat that is making the room bite. As the maid approaches, the body breathes deeply and the moths briefly scatter, before resettling on their roost. He cannot see the body’s face through the veil of moths, nor its genitalia, simply a pair of full lips, gasping. It’s alive, it’s breathing. The body is cold to his touch; it is a waiting body, hibernating. The maid prints his thumb against a moth, crushing it, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger, its dust caking to his fingertips. He sees an empty bottle of tequila on the bedstand. As he watches the communion, he regrets how dependent he has become on alcohol to achieve intimacy. He remembers passing just such bottles of tequila into lover’s hands, into friend’s hands, waiting for the snaking hallways of distance between them to be shortened by the acrid spirits. Turning from the moth-draped body, he walks out of the room and shuts the door carefully behind him. The walls of the hotel heave suddenly; it’s going to vomit, he thinks.
There is the smell of pine needles. Not the bitter wind, not the sting of a harpoon wound, but the smell of pine needles and a solitary moth flitting around a bare bulb. A door is cracked open. Standing, I push my way through it, my legs shaking, struggling to hold my weight. I am in a living room, a rustic one. Where before the air was tinted with the scent of pine, now I can smell food, somehow strange to me. I wonder how long it has been since I’ve eaten.

“You’re awake.”

The voice, which should be in my head, should be another invasion of my autonomy, another scream from whatever stalks me in that endless desert, is real, coming from an older woman. She holds out her hand to me, which I take. She is from before, in the cell she was kind to me. How did I not hear that she was an old woman? Her voice is tinged with a mother’s stern respect and gentle care.

And there, behind her in the living room a child pushes a toy train around a spiraling track.

“I’ll be hungry, dinner’s almost ready.” She says.

I shake my head, unable to speak just yet, and notice for the first time my body, how my ribs jut from my stomach, how my teeth ache, how my arms kink at the sides. I look like a scarecrow, I look like the end of a life, I look nothing like myself. In the mirror a stranger’s face rests upon mine, and rather than rouse them, rather than rip this alien expression off of myself, I only lust for sleep.

“Where am I?”

“It doesn’t seem to matter much to you anymore, does it?”

“You’re to be kept here for a while.” she says.

“It? What a callous word, as though some monster were stalking you. No. When this is over I think you’ll find this shadow of yours quite familiar.”

Outside a deep forest rustles peacefully in the breeze. The leaves in the trees like static, themselves noise, obscuring the approach of whatever it is that approaches. She lights a cigarette before sitting down to read. How long has it been since I have read? When I open a book, any book, I find the words are written just for me, detailing the exact moment of my life, ending just before the next.

Books for me have been poisoned with the dread of the repeated past and the sickening drop of the unknown.

“You keep waiting for life to make sense, to line up in the end.” She says.

“And will it?” I ask.

“There is a deep desire for you, you can hear it in the woods, it spoke to all of us before, but now it just whispers in the woods. It’s reaching out, pulling you forward.”

Before I can respond she puts her finger to her lips.

“Listen.”

It sounds like rain, it sounds like a storm rolling through the forest.

An insect lands on my hand, a large green moth with eyes on its wings. Its proboscis tickles me, then I see them all, the hundreds, thousands of moths, floating through the woods on heavy wings. The woman standing next to me wears a dress patterned with small sunflowers, or are they daisies? In the fading light it is hard to know.
Transmutation 3: Triangle approaching, triangle receding

I insist, ignore the claim that magic is an outmoded explanation for the previously unexplainable. Magic is gestural. For example, harmony is magic. Take geomancy: when architecture mimics nature. This mimicry forms a harmonic bond between the mind and nature; it builds a bridge between an internal state and an external state. The Aztec pyramid at Teotihuacan for example, like all religious spaces, is composed of a positive space and a negative space. A space occupied by the worshipped, and a space to be occupied by the worshipper. In this instance, the pyramid is the positive space, the courtyard the negative. To a supplicant looking upwards, towards the pyramid - the divine, the curve of the pyramid mimics perfectly the ridgeline of the mountain behind it. Thus, they see the holy, the human, and the natural all unified in the same gesture: the curve of a mountain.

This is the architecture of the body. The soft human form, the constructed building - stone wood or iron, and the original image - the rock of a mountain. As the building mimics the mountain, the body occupies the space of the building and the mountain the same. From the three leveled space a new emotional tenor is born, a new experience, and with the new thought, the body changes to carry it. Maybe its back is straighter, as there was a prayer for strength. Maybe the body hangs its arms lower, as a prayer was cast for someone who is already lost. Whatever the shape, it is in the image of the volcanic ridge, pointing towards the sky. Whatever the shape, we are three times separate from it.

Trust in me, take my hand, and trace the curvature of this mountain.
From the left wings of terns sprout slate shingles; the birds tumble down, pointing accusations at the ground. Shingles sprout feathers, trying to be birds, and slide downward from roofs sloped against the wintertime snow. The fog rolls in off the fjord at four in the morning and doesn’t break until the noon sun reaches its zenith. Potted plastic sunflowers are battered in the wind; technology freezes.

With a two-toothed fish knife, a woman bifurcates a trout along its pale belly. The pressure from her hands causes its mouth to clamp as though it were still alive and gulping mosquitoes. The woman’s lips move slowly, mimicking its absurd gesture with a steady smacking rhythm. The water in the sink eddies and forms lethargic whirlpools, dripping pink from the fish’s body as it is stripped of its scales. The woman lifts her eyes to listen to the damp sound of the falling birds, before returning to her fish. She takes her knife and scrapes the roe from its gut.

A screen door bangs shut and a granddaughter runs in with her plastic sunflowers clutched to her chest.

Noticing the glare of the granddaughter’s crystalline eyes the woman gestures with her knife, permitting the granddaughter to speak.

“Gramma I am scared of the birds.”

The sound of roe slopped in a metal trashcan replies.

The granddaughter picks at the petal of a sunflower, before setting her vase on the kitchen counter and moving to shutter the windows. The birds begin to fall more heavily. When she speaks, the grandmother’s reply is buried by the patter of slate and tern. Where the terns have landed outside, they start to struggle, their bladed white wings protracting circles around the shingles that anchor them. Their feet grasp and curl, in search of steady purchase. The granddaughter returns to staring, through the woman, through the walls of the house, through the morning mist and out to the shore of a frozen lake, hemmed in by tall pines.

The grandmother shouts above the din:

“You are sick, and up too early. By noon the birds will be flying and the sun will be shining. I will set the shingles back in the roof, and the fish will be nearly ready for breakfast.”
I

“No, do not run.” The old woman says, placing her hand on my shoulder. “It is late, and you are tired, and there is nowhere worth running to.”

She is lying, or at least I cannot let myself believe her as my breath catches in my throat, and I struggle against vomiting from terror. Pushing her hand from my shoulder I start to run. The first moth that lands on my arm, I slap. As the moth is crushed, I sense the Creature’s terrible attention drawn to me. I run. My legs, pounding, carry me through the woods, over fallen logs, through thorn bushes, ducking beneath pine branches, although it is as the woman said, I am deeply tired and the forest is dark and unknowable.

The exhaustion that grips me is alien, almost as though I were some sort of plucked plant, wilting. No, as I run through the forest I feel less human with each slowing stride. Lost in the woods at night I am both indistinguishable from the night and indistinguishable from the forest itself. My legs slow, limping, shriveled, my arms hang loosely by my side.

Pushing through a bramble I find myself in a circular clearing where the grass lies flat. This is the place where elk go to sleep, I tell myself as I look around. Around me, the sleeping bodies of elk heave.

Exhausted, I crawl up towards one, and the beast is not startled by my presence at all. The elk groans, a haunted sound, so close to a human scream in the nighttime forest. I realize then, that the elk before me is giving birth. I lay my hands on its heaving flank and feel the cold sweat beneath its fur. As I do, the elk lays still; it is dead. Taking my hands from it, I lie in the flattened grass, the Creature close, so close I can hear it ringing in my ears, feel my mouth drying in anticipation of its approach. Something sharp digs into my back.

Rolling over, I find a fish knife lying in the grass. Knowing exactly what to do I turn to the elk doe’s body and prepare to cut out the fawns.
Two children are playing outside in a rose garden. At the edge of the garden stands a greenhouse, entirely made of turquoise glass, with gables and a slanting roof. The rows of roses outside lead up to its door.

One child, a boy, is slightly shorter; the other, a girl, is slightly older. The girl chases the boy in circles around the garden, she shouts before closing in on him and pushing him down onto a grassy hill. For a moment she pauses, worried she has broken him, that he will start to cry. He does not cry, instead just squinting his eyes to protect them from the bright sun. The girl, laughing, jumps down beside him.

“I caught you again!” she says.

“He, too proud, says nothing.

“Now that I’ve caught you, I will spirit you away to the land of faeries.”

He shouts in protest.

“Now that I’ve caught you, I will spirit you away to the land of faeries.”

He shouts in protest.

“You will be replaced by a foundling; that isn’t quite right, that doesn’t know how to live in the world. And mama and papa won’t know it’s not you.”

“What if I want to go? You only caught me because I wanted to be caught!”

“If you wanted to be caught, then you want to stay. And if you want to stay in faerie you have to eat the food.”

“He nods

[on the rocks around her she sees hundreds of dishes, filled with untouched food]

The girl digs in the dirt before pulling out two grubs; they curl slightly in her hand.

“He signs, waiting for his mother to call him in from the house on the hill. His mother doesn’t call.

“Here. I’ll eat one too.” She says.

“The boy shouts and tries to run away, but the girl is too quick.

“Come on, eat!” she shouts “On the count of three.”

“He takes a grub.

“One! Two! Three!”

Thunder booms over the hillside. Both children jump, dropping the insect’s bodies. The day has turned suddenly stormy, and silver clouds choke the sky. A plate falls from the storm and shatters on a cobblestone path, shards of china skittering around the garden. The children scream and run for the closest shelter, the greenhouse. An anticipatory mixing bowl falls before the storm breaks. The children run inside. They slam the glass door shut behind them. Inside the greenhouse grow rows of sunflowers, all pointing their faces up towards the sunless sky.

The storm breaks, and dishware begins to pelt down on the greenhouse, the glass of the building chiming with each blow. A large platter flies into the building, and with a sickening tension, a single crack appears in a rose window on the westward wall. Then, the greenhouse shatters, shards of glass raining down around the two exposed children.
II

I reach inside the elk to feel two fawns inside squirming gently. As I do, it begins to snow, heavy flakes which cling to my skin and coat the woodland floor. Hands deep inside the warmth of the recently dead elk I grapple with the struggling fawns. I do not know how to assist a creature in giving birth. Touching a dead thing so alive, three creatures caught in the trap of living, reminds me that I am separate from them, must appear monstrous to them. It is as though I were reaching through a veiled box, and placing my hands on an idea, or a cruel joke. Nearly two hours pass before the fawns are released. The snow has collected around me, and I am camouflaged with the now silent forest. The sleeping Elk are starting to awaken and are looking outward, in the same direction towards the nighttime forest. Fish knife in hand I cut the umbilical cord and free the young animals. They walk shakily, shivering in the heavy snow. The night seems to be lit from another place, a liminal source of light, this mysterious light which has clung so thickly to me as I passed through this world. But as I try to remember it, the last time I saw it, I draw a blank. On everything I draw a blank. I try to recall my passed sister, my passed mother, a birthday celebration, what I ate last, but the memories slip from my grasp, as though my time on the earth has left no ripples, bent no branches, left even the dust and sand undisturbed. Only these two shivering fawns, the lone testament to my time alive. A memory of:

[an elk doe, dragged down to the lakeshore.]

The elk sense the creature’s approach and begin to run, scattering snow as they disappear into the forest. The fawns I rescued struggle in the snow, their thin legs postholing and twisting. I stand, trying to carry both of the struggling creatures. A sharp piercing interrupts my defiant walk. I drop the fawns which run from me, slowly but naturally, as though they had been walking for years, and it was me that was learning. Rolling down my sock I find a piece of turquoise glass lodged in my ankle. The nighttime forest seems to bend, distort, the gathered snow dumps from the warped branches of the pines in a glittering shower. There is nothing other than this twisted moment, as though my entire life has occurred here. As though this is the one moment that were true, recurring at last. At last I have returned to the true place, the true point, from where the rest of life grew as a supple dream. It occurs to me, that perhaps I was not living at all, but just walking across a mirror, a reflection cast on a flat and turgid lake. And here I am, the snow pouring around me, pine trees twisting, at last in a pose that matches my reflection. That which hunts me is upon me, of that much I am sure.
Transmutation 4: Circle tracing itself, becoming solid

I ask you not to gesture at me like I am some homunculus. Like I am just another vertebrate punctuated, pins in what would be a thorax in another body, open torso to the sun and wind. I ask you not to see me a skeleton wrapped in skin, and too long in the bone and dull in the tooth. When I close my mind breasts pull on my chest, and my nipples feel on flesh, where there is nothing but space and hair. We are standing on a plain, you and me, and our new bodies hang from a pillory, and the grass is the horizon. When we wear them I ask you not to see me as ridiculous, some small man, in a body-suit pulling strings.

We must have apocalyptic bodies for these re-apocalyptic times.

I know that what I wear now is temporary, and when we are ready, we will hatch like butterflies. I know that this touch on my hand, from your unknown hand, will be temporary, unless the moment shatters and is stretched, indefinitely as a broken and discordant note.

It is hard for me to think when my teeth hurt, because I know that they are rotting most of all. I can taste them rotting, and feel their instability, stones in my gums - pulling ever so slightly out of the earth.

The apocalypse came before we were born. The first thing was an ordering, and now we walk this desolation of straight lines and linear numbers. As surely as your first thing was a naming, and your second a seeing, a sizing up. If we drop first who we were called and second who we were seen, into what crack will we slip?
A young boy and his father sit in a living room, watching the television, and if one were to look out through the television, through the condensation, they would see a setting sun. The only light in the room, the television and sun, leave islands of shadows around the flat. The father reaches towards his son and pats him on the back. On the television: Three women have been freed from their captors, apparently held on a boat at sea for ransom. The father leans over and pats the boy again. The boy thinks that this gesture is a comedy, the reach of an automaton. He must not be that young, thinking like that. He gestures back, hugging, but releases himself quickly. It’s almost as if they are performing for the women on screen, showing them how a father and son watch television. They change the channel. Now on the television a pair of lovers twirl through a field of sunflowers. The sunflowers break their backs as they stare toward the sky. The lovers fall down laughing. Sensing the father reaching to pat him again, the boy stands to leave. As he approaches his room, he notices that the wall has grown over where his door had been before. His hands pressed into his eyes he returns back down the hallway.

How old am I? He asks himself. Is this my home? He walks back towards the living room, picking his way between stacks of dishes. Did he wash these dishes? The living room is empty and he steps outside. The last warmth of the desert evening strikes his face. A sun has set and a moon has not yet risen. The cottonwood tree blows softly in the wind, headlights displaying the true red of dust rendered blue in the twilight. He knocks on the window, tinted. Silence. He opens the door - the truck is empty. He returns inside.

On the television:

[cracking their thin knuckles, they pick up a bowl, their fingernails manicured, and so pale as to reflect the moonlight. They drink from the bowl, the wood darkening, wine spilling over the rim, their lips stained purple when they set the bowl down.]

Purple like a wound, a wound across a perfect face, soft and formless in the night, a wound so jarring against such a soft landscape, like a canyon splitting open a peaceful meadow.

They reach for the butchered flank of the elk doe.

The boy, closes his eyes, turns off the television.
Her lungs ache as she walks through the pulsing neon hallway of a club. The blue light strips lead her to a bathroom where she looks blearily into a mirror. Pulling at her tired looking face she fixes her makeup, putting extra layers of maroon lipstick over her lips. Returning to the dancefloor she is lost in the sea of people. She can feel her lungs twinging, but she cannot be recognized in the room. The jumping bodies all appear the same in the gaps of sight between flashes of a strobe light. Where am I she screams. She feels her hand pulling against a woman’s dress, hauling on it before both collapse. The sea of people breaks to reveal her on all fours, struggling to stand as the other woman drags her down. They tumble in the center of the crowd, a steady electronic pulse beating in the air. Finally they break free of each other and she runs, searching for the blue guiding lights, for an exit sign, the bar, a familiar face. Between flashes of light she sees a figure approaching her. It is tall and crooked, its face impossible to recognize between the strobes. Somehow it looks wrong in its clothing, as though born in another place and forced to wear clothes entirely alien to its form. As though the clothes were just loosely hung or draped and not worn at all.

[It reaches forward towards her, and she folds her fingers around their hand, suddenly assured of their humanity.]

She blinks. “Jane!” the woman shouts. “Thank God I’ve found you Jane, we’ve been looking for ages, we want to go home.”

The new woman is dark haired, short, thin. The girl doesn’t recognize this woman, can’t place her anywhere in her memory.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I know you” She says, slipping her wrist out of the woman’s hands, slipping out of sight, into the pulsing light of the crowd.
A woman has not been eating. Her ribs are jutting out at the sides, and her hips are sharp. She sits dutifully on a closed toilet stirring epsom salts into a glass of water. Drinking them down she heaves slightly, unable to vomit. A nausea has struck her and stuck with her for days. She feels as though she is taking up an impossible amount of space, as though she filled every space, and overflowed grotesquely out of her own. Everything around her seems damp, her skin, the walls, her glass of water, everything she’s touched for days - vaporous and moist. At least in the bathroom it’s explainable, she reflects, so there she stays. Her bare feet stick to the tile floor. Pulling out a purse she removes eleven items: five of which are razor blades, the others antiseptic cream, gauze bandage, a mossy pinecone, a ball of mud, snow, pine needles. She chooses a razorblade and bares her upper hip.

[devour her. They press their purple lips against hers, and she pulls back gasping. They start to undress before her, still clutching the meat, the meat leaving tracks of blood along their body. Their clothes seem to fall away when touched. Their body shines in the fluorescent light, the space between their legs completely smooth, without genitals of any kind, their nipples puffy and erect. She marvels at how soft their skin is, as though it were not skin at all but a membrane of some kind, something she could push through. They offer the meat to her and she bites into it. With the backs of her fingers, she wipes the blood from her mouth.]

The room is empty except for her. She washes her face, brushes her teeth, sits down to urinate, places her clothes in the center of the room. She walks around the room multiple times. She picks up around the bathroom, straightening the toiletries. She prepares a needle for a hormone injection and injects it into her thigh. Opening her phone she flips through photos of her from a few years before and reflects on how different she looks now. Penis and testicals in one hand, razor in the other, she detaches them from her body. There is no blood; the cut seels in a perfect line.

When she finally looks at herself in a full length mirror that evening she cannot recognize herself at all.
[pulling the bone from between their lips, they pick the last meat from it. The carcass before them seems to still breathe, its sides heaving as though somewhere else, as though it were alive, running, pounding through the woods. The girl stands before them, a wilted and crushed sunflower clutched in her hand. She seems somehow familiar with them, but otherwise entirely lost.

The creature pushes her aside, apparently uninterested]

A white room is waiting. Alone, they sit at the room’s center, eating. It is a strange room with no right angles; they are a strange person with little to define them. Their jaw slants slightly, giving way to their neck without the distinction of a jawline, their entire face indistinct, as though stolen, or poorly reproduced from the face of someone else. They stare upward at a central point on the domed ceiling. A single skylight at this zenith reveals a building mass of clouds. A hairline crack runs down the length of the dome and the building heaves. A small shower of white dust falls down into the observer’s eyes. They blink, rubbing with the back of their wrist. Unperturbed, they return to watching the cracks splintering across the dome. A light patter of rain falls through the cracks of the roof and onto the floor, flowing into an aqueduct that runs through the center of the room. As the cracks grow more water gushes in, pooling around the feet of the observer. They reach down with slender fingers and grasp at the water, it is viscous, the texture of egg whites.

A series of columns which run along the perimeter of the room begin to crumble, and as they do the walls to collapse inward, taking on the quality of dented eggshell. The observer pulls their feet up onto their stool, curling their arms around themself. The room convulses inward, heaving rhythmically. They clutch the back of their seat, their hands pressing into its hard-wood posts. The wind whistling through the collapsing building almost sounds like a moan. The strange captive relaxes their grip, pushes their hand down into their pants, drops their feet down into the liquid and braces themself against their chair, masterbating. Or are they digging, pawing at their blank groin? A wall eventually constricts close enough to come into contact with the observer’s outstretched feet. It is soft and their feet pass through it. They return their gaze upward as the stained-glass skylight shatters and the deluge of viscous water pours over them. I am coming they think, I am being let out, I am rising, I am here. They cough, the liquid spilling over their pale lips.

Then, the clouds break. A ray of sunlight falls on their face, and like this, glittering, they look impossibly beautiful. They seem to become more angular, as though their skeleton had turned from cartilage to bone. The water pools around them, up to their gasping lips, which are reddening, filling with blood. They breathe deeply before plunging beneath the surface. The rest of the building crumples, collapses inward, settles.
I

From silence, from darkness, I am lucid. My heart beats deceptively slowly, I hold my breath to preserve the silence. I am in its clutch, and I, whoever I was, am fading. Its breath is on my neck, cold and slow. At the sound of dragging I dare to open my eyes. The fawns which ran beside me are full grown elk now, and limp, slipping backward into the darkness of the forest. For some time I listen to whatever lies behind the wall of trees feast and imagine, with the snap of every bone, with every tearing sound, my own body under those claw-like fingers. Somehow, that caress is welcome. In the slow and meditative silence of eating, there is nothing for me to remember, nowhere for me to return to. Everything is strange to me, and I am a stranger to all of it. The creature finishes its feast, and moves toward the forest, silhouetted by the falling snow. It reaches out its hand, as if to help me to my feet. Their slender fingers wrap between mine, cold and soft, like the petals of a flower. The snowflakes freeze in midair. The forest falls away from me, like scraps of clothing, like a suit of armor I had dragged with me for my entire life. I am on the shore of a frozen lake, from which a single twists.
Transmutation 5: Point into Home

Do not wrench your wrist from my hand. Do not struggle now, try to pull away, we are almost there. Can you not sense it? Smell the air. Do you smell flowers? Listen. Can you hear, somewhere outside, elk moving? Do you wish to crack like a chrysalis, to slip in between the cracks, be monstrous, a shadow? Breathe deeply. That which was lost is about to be found.
Some time ago there was a girl in the second room from the elevator on the third floor of the ER who suffered from a particularly heavy period. She bled every night starting at 8:00, with the menstruation ending at 8:00 the next morning, and was regarded as a bit of a medical oddity because of this. The hospital she stayed at was specialized in treating diseases and disorders that are undiscovered or unexplained. She was prescribed a monthly checkup, in which all of her vitals were tested and additional iron was given to her through an IV drip.

When her roommate was wheeled in at midnight, the girl didn’t notice through her cramps, instead focusing on a fixed point in the ceiling. In the morning a blue curtain had been drawn between them. The girl, not unfamiliar with the hospital called out a hello; only heavy breaths replied. She lay back in bed and returned to her fixed point on the ceiling. From the bed, she could make out the shapes of mountains in the drips from the whitewash on the ceiling, branching canyonlands in its cracks. She saw the circular light on the ceiling as a vast frozen lake that reflected perfectly the circumference of the moon. Her hospital bed was an island; the ocean of the room around her, the walls and television stretching impossibly far away. To her left, the curtain hung: the edge of the world, a cliff-face on which all water flowed upward toward the sky. It was a basin shaped world, filling slowly, and she imagined soon she would float to the surface and pull herself out.

At night she woke up. The curtain across from her was glowing. The city lights of the machinery around her twinkled neon. She was used to her bleeding, but it still irritated and awakened her occasionally. She could hear the strange patient’s breathing, their heartbeat, the occasional cough.

“Hello,” the girl called out over the edge of the world. Only the breathing replied.

Frightened the girl pulled up her covers. A single piece of paper swished under the curtain. She trembled and picked it up. It read:

[You will be a goddess who carries a world and a moon in her stomach / A black desert will crust over the world when you’re gone / where your toes touch white lilies will grow / roses will bloom as your crown.]

The room around her grew verdant. Roots pushed through cracks in the ceiling, and green sprouts popped out of her mattress. The walls opened and bloomed like the petals of a flower. To her it looked like an old mountain forest against a lake cupped in the frozen hands of the mountain. The shimmering curtain still hung in the air, straight through the center of what had been a room.

The girl stepped off the bed, her feet splashing against the floor, the tile rippled into water as she walked across its surface.

[Feeling rocky sand beneath her feet, she tosses a piece of seaglass, catching it.]

Before she left, she pulled a single sunflower from a vase on her bedside table, a treasured shard of turquoise seaglass. She reached out, parted the waterfall, pressed through to cold air on the other side.
[I see the young woman sitting at the roots of the old tree, the old tree that twists out over the frozen lake. The forest the beast stalked me through has been shed from me, alongside my clothing, and naked in the snow I expect to shiver, but do not. The Creature, more human at this distance, stares at the woman. She has driven a piece of glass into its long foot. It stares at her, confused, betrayed, but then turns from her, beckons me, waves out to me. The woman, confused at having a visitor looks up, her hospital gown tattered, clinging to her body. As she raises her face, I recognize her. I sit. Holding my head in my hands I remain until the creature with a single finger raises my chin so that I must look at the woman again. She has my face, not my face now, but my face as it would have been so many years ago. My face if it were not strange, were not slightly twisted, did not look always wrong to me. She walks forward towards me uncertain, looking back at the creature behind her, as though expecting it to hold her back. She presses a crushed and wilted sunflower into my hand. She speaks slowly, as though she has stood silent for decades.

“It’s the last thing I took with me.”

I hold it in my hand, marveling at it. This sunflower, somehow it feels alien to me in this place. It is from where I came from before, from the world I had run so doggedly across.

Now it is so clearly out of place, on this frozen shore, beneath this ancient and twisting tree.

She is me, but so much more human, she has everything that was absent from me. She lacks only that which hounded me, made me lost and strange. As she is human, I am a monster.

“Did we have a mother?” I ask.

“Yes” she says, “But that is your mother. Mine is waiting back at home.” She gestures to the monster by the shore.

“Did I have a sister? A brother? Lovers, friends?”

“I don’t know.” She says. “You had me. But we’ve only just met. You replaced me, you were made to be like me.”

I ask a final question, “How long have I been gone?”

“How long I have been gone.”

We follow the creature, an otherworldly mother leading its children through a suspended snowstorm. As we walk she picks paralyzed snowflakes from the air.]
[We come to a frozen pond with a waterfall. She turns and hugs me goodbye. As her body presses against mine I feel that she is thin, that she has not been eating. As I press my body against hers I feel that mine is strange, angular, long in the wrong places, already stretched and distorted. The sunflower she gave me turns to dirt between my clawlike fingers. The snow she walks through melts on contact with her skin, but stays frozen and crystallized on contact with mine. For a moment we stand picking out snowflakes, marveling at the difference, then she turns and walks towards the lake.

She walks out onto the ice. It holds as one sheet, until, like a crack appearing in a perfectly circular plate, a single line ruptures the circle. She disappears beneath the surface.

I turn back and look at the world I am standing in, at my carnivorous mother, at the suspended snowflakes and feel nothing but a burning warmth spreading through my limbs. I want to leap, I want to gambol, I want to climb into the branches of the tree. I look towards the creature, which is so like a mother, but under a different understanding of a mother. A mother, but a mother without a father, a creator even, but that word is hollow now too. As I look at the tree I think of the word home, but home in another language, a language I have not learnt, have not spoken before.

The mother gestures towards the tree and repeats my word.]