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The Telepathist

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

The Telepathist

By Yuan Lisa Zhuang

This story follows a sister and brother gifted with telepathic communication. The story explores music, secrets, language and is ultimately about a family deciding whether or not it wants to stay together.

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Table of Contents

Part 1.....	1
Part 2.....	28
Part 3.....	66
Part 4.....	119

I.

Your song plays on the radio. It plays again. And again. And again.

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

My newest subject is a fan of yours. On her first visit to the lab, she brought a CD of your songs, the silver cover indicating that she had compiled the mix herself. I was unaware of the contents of the CD until later that afternoon, when I burned the songs and ran the audio files through the notching software. I slipped on a pair of headphones. I clicked on a random file to ensure the CD had processed correctly. Your voice flooded my ears: *Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?*

I suddenly felt the heat of a stagelight, the gentle bumps of a van rolling across the country. Desert heat, ocean water. It's amazing how a particular chord progression can remind you of a texture, a taste, the way light fell through an open window. The memories came suddenly, relentlessly. I was filled with such feeling that I didn't know what else to do than escape it—I yanked the headphones off.

In the moments after, I realized that the song was still playing, coming tiny and flat through the headphones. I hit pause. My fingers, I realized, were cold. I pressed them against the computer console, which was warm from exertion. My eyes drifted from the screen and to the white wall, undecorated. Papers had piled up again on my cabinets. The clock ticked incessantly behind me. I closed out of the audio file, ejected the CD, and I was back. Back in my office. Back in Colby. Back by myself.

Everywhere now. The grocery store, my car, home—*Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?*

Mom's been keeping the kitchen radio on most hours of most days. She has ever since she found out that music could be good for Dad. Every time your song comes on—*Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember*—I move to turn off the radio, dial down the volume, switch the station—but Mom bats my hand away. The noise chases me to my bedroom, and, when I can still hear you there, deeper down the hall into the bathroom. I lock the door. I fill the tub. In the water, I lower myself inch by inch until my head is swallowed under.

That day in the van, the desert stretched out before us:

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

I remember a summer evening on the driveway, the air dense and sweet. I was seven. You were five. My hands were powdered with chalk—I was drawing a map of Colby on the concrete. In the center of town was the college, next to it swirls of yellow that represented the hayfield. The river, a wide, blue ribbon, cut through the upper corner of town. Our house was a simple red brick rectangle in the corner of the map. As I drew, I shuffled closer and closer to the road. In your new light up shoes, you had been trekking laps around our cul-de-sac. Each time you passed our driveway, you shrugged on a look of disinterest: eyes toward the distance, shoulders loose. I began drawing forests on the concrete, extending the green swirls toward the sidewalk. I wanted to catch your attention so we could draw together.

But three laps passed, and you hadn't stopped. Finally, on your fourth lap, I asked you what you were doing. You paused, giving a cursory glance over our house, as if seeing it for the first time.

"I'm being a stranger," you said and marched on.

I remember a copy of *National Geographic* you carried with you everywhere. A golden mummy donned the cover, promising new discoveries deep within the pyramids, but all you seemed to care about was a spread of the Petrified Forest on the last page. "Look at it," you said, holding the page close enough to my face that I could smell the ink. "Isn't it amazing?"

The spread showed gentle, beige hills dotted with disks of petrified wood. On the glossy magazine page, the sky looked flat.

"It's just sand," I said. "Sand and old trees."

"No, really look at it," you said, pressing the magazine closer. "Don't you see?"

I remember an evening we all went fishing by the river.

"Did you know," Mom said, sitting on the grass, fishing rod discarded beside her, "that all living things originally came from the ocean?"

At six, I did not know this. I tried imagining a human washing ashore, their legs wobbly from years of swimming. Perhaps they would have scales along their arms and legs, which shed as the sun baked them dry.

"Everything?" you asked. "Even birds?"

Mom laughed. "Even birds."

You paused for a moment. “What about sharks? Or whales? Why didn’t they come up with us?”

Dad chuckled from where he stood by the river’s edge, still watching his line vigilantly. “Because they’re not as smart,” Dad said. “Only the smart ones came up.”

I remember being called stupid. Trash. Dumb. Children’s words, because Dad lacked the English for anything more eloquent. I remember standing in the cold. I remember spilled orange juice, and Dad’s command to lick.

I also remember going to the grocery store with Mom at six and speaking with a clerk. Mom was looking for vanilla, but couldn’t find any. Her eyes roamed around the store, looking for help, but she didn’t know the word for vanilla. So, instead, she pushed me toward a teenage clerk, her palm in the middle of my back.

“Tell him what we’re looking for,” Mom said.

I remember the first time Dad slapped me. A slap is hard to anticipate. It feels like ice at first, then fire.

A dilated aorta, Mom would say. That was why Dad was so angry all the time. His high blood pressure. The stress. This had been true since before we were born. He did not hate us. He was just angry.

I remember a chair raised above my head, threatening to land.

I remember a shattered glass, cuts on my shins. Our shins. In the company of Dad’s yelling, we always stood apart, eyes latching onto an object we could trace and retrace. We were ashamed to feel hurt. We were ashamed to feel ashamed.

“Don’t cry,” Mom would say, placing a roll of toilet paper in front of us. “There is nothing to cry about.”

I remember the time I slapped Mom. Mom and Dad were yelling. It was a school morning. Dad snapped his chopsticks in half and threw them toward the kitchen windows. After he was gone, off to work, the garage door cranking shut behind him, Mom thundered into the living room. She flung books against the wall, kicked toys strewn on the floor, and swept the golden Buddha off the mantle. By the time she was finished, she was breathing heavily. I could hear her voice in each exhale. My chest hurt.

“Clean it up,” she said, looking at us, and we did. On our way to school that morning, Mom swerved the car. Right, as if to hit a mailbox. Left, as if to collide with the incoming van. We sat quietly together in the back, grasping tightly to our seats. This was the everyday—and, back then, what I thought would be the forever. The powerlessness. The sour rot of dread. So chronic and inescapable. I didn’t want any of that anymore, and so, in the backseat of the car, I began plotting. I would do something, I decided. I would do something after school.

By the end of recess, I had a speech planned out in my head. I would tell Mom that she was being reckless, that she was being no better than Dad. I would tell her how her fights with Dad made my arms and legs feel leaden all the time, and how I didn’t want to live like that anymore. I even imagined her counter arguments—*but you’re young, this is what families are like—or—then what do you want to do? Do you want to leave this family? Where will you go? Huh? Tell me, where will you sleep?*

By the time I saw Mom in the school parking lot, my anger had doubled. I ran through my speech again, the voice in my head growing frantic. I stayed quiet on the car ride. I wanted her to look at me when I spoke.

But at home, standing in the kitchen, backpack still slung over my shoulders, the words evaded me. Words were suddenly inadequate.

“Do you want a snack?” Mom asked, turning to me, and instead of responding, I raised my palm and slapped her across the face. Not hard, but with the entirety of my palm. I felt my heart race in my chest. My limbs felt loose. Relaxed. I had said nothing, and yet I felt breathless, as though I’d screamed at her everything I wanted to say. Was this what Dad felt when he slapped me? Mom’s mouth fell agape. *This is for marrying him*, I thought. You stared from the hallway. Dad was not home yet. After a moment, Mom closed her mouth. Straightened. Then she marched down the hall and locked herself in her bedroom. I stared at the closed door, my hand still held out in front of me, my arm feeling like a foreign limb. Giving a slap, I learned that day, was the opposite of receiving one. Your hand feels hot at first, then cold.

That night, Mom decided not to cook. She did not mention the slap to Dad. We drove into town for McDonald’s instead, the restaurant’s lights glowing in the granular dark. No one talked in the car. When we reached the restaurant, we silently decided that we would dine in. No one wanted to go home yet. Heads lifted as we entered. Eyes stared. We drifted a little closer together, a pack narrowing its distance. In a small booth in the corner, you and I ate chicken nuggets and played with little plastic toys. The two of us laughed, comforted by the lights, by the seclusion of the booth—our little pocket of the world—and slowly, Mom and Dad smiled.

*

In college, I would learn that sound is nothing more than a vibration—pushing, so to speak, against the ear drum, thereby activating a collection of fine bones in the middle ear known

as the ossicles. The ossicles, in turn, thrust against the oval window, sending turbulence through the cochlear fluid. The fluid washes over the cochlea's hair cells like a tide rippling through a kelp forest. The hair cells, now stimulated, send electric signals to the brain, invoking the sensation of hearing. Sound, then, is not unlike a finger, flicking a line of dominos to set off a Rube Goldberg. How simple, I had thought to myself, textbook laid forth before me. How unexpectedly mechanical.

I remember the time I first heard you. You were eight. I was ten. We were at a motel pool somewhere far from home, the sky dark beyond the windows, chlorine stiff in the air. As Mom lounged on a wicker chair, eyes skimming a magazine, we ran back and forth between the pool and the hot tub. We were witnessing temperature's relativity: the pool was icier after a dip in the hot tub, the hot tub warmer after a dive in the pool.

At first, we ran together, watching our reflections in the darkened windows. I was taller than you then and capable of running twice as fast. On our fourth lap to the pool, I wanted to impress you with my speed, and so I sprinted ahead. I dove in first.

In a documentary I'd seen once, marine biologists descended to the sea floor in a submarine, the submarine round and alien-like in the dark water. The biologists were on the search, I believe, for the ocean's deepest creatures. They swept along the sea floor, catching occasional glimpses of blind, worm-like creatures. In the dark, their submarine glowed brilliantly, lonesomely.

After I hit the water, my muscles shuddering, my nose stinging with chlorine, I imagined myself descending past the underwater lights to those lonely depths—places of darkness, of quiet. I kept my legs curled in, my eyes closed. For a moment, everything was peaceful.

I was still underwater when my head filled with noise.

That first time, it hurt like a headache. A raw, herniating pain. I broke through the surface, desperate for air, and that was when I saw you, curled up on the slick floor with Mom kneeling at your side, blood streaming down your face. Your crying filled my ears as your voice filled my head—*blood, blood, blood.*

You must've slipped.

Back in the motel room, you sat on the edge of the bed, a white towel pressed to your head. Dad paced back and forth, yelling. Mom ran off to fetch ice. Your voice tore through my mind:

The neighbors will hear.

Is Mom coming back?

I want to go home.

Then—*I can hear her.*

I looked up. Our eyes met.

I can hear you.

Most of the time, you called me *she, her.*

Why can she hear me?

Why can I hear her?

It takes conscious effort to think *You*. *You* is an acknowledgement that you are not alone. Not only can you hear, but you know you are heard. Only on rare instances when you wanted to address me did you call me *You*.

Where are you going?

You are thinking too loud.

I hate you.

At first, I was annoyed by your constant feedback. Not a single thought could go unacknowledged. For instance, that first night lying in bed in that motel room, I pondered whether it was only you that could hear my thoughts, or if Mom and Dad had been listening to us all along.

Then they would've said something, you thought. Then they would be nicer.

I must've thought something that conveyed my annoyance.

I can't stop it, you thought. She's doing it too.

Slowly, as you fell asleep, your thoughts grew quieter and quieter. I assumed that, when you were fully asleep, your thoughts would all go away, and I could return to silence. Instead, as your gentle snores filled the room, something like soft radio static hummed in my head, brief snippets of your voice cutting through:

The water... pool... her...

Despite your assurances that Mom and Dad could not hear us, I was unmoored by the possibility. Like all ten year olds, I hid a few secrets: my first fleeting brushes with desire, fears I knew I should have outgrown. I began taking extra precautions to hide my thoughts.

But in order to hide my thoughts, I had to stop thinking. To stop thinking, as I found out on the long car ride home from the motel, was impossible. My mind was easily distracted by a tall oak that passed by, and thoughts of tall oaks somehow morphed into daydreams of places I wanted to live when I grew up. Venice, Italy, perhaps, where the drifting of gondolas slowed the pace of life, or some city along the New England coast. Somewhere far less landlocked than Colby, where hickory oak shrouded the horizon.

I only realized I had started thinking again when your daydreams interrupted my own:

Glass windows... city... the ocean...

When you realized I had overheard you, you flushed red. *Stop thinking stop thinking stop thinking.* I noticed early on that you were particularly defensive of your daydreams. I suppose I was defensive too. Daydreams of the future are fragile. They usually have the privacy of your own head, where you can test any scenario without fear that you are hoping for too much. To have someone else in your own head then is to be made aware of how fragile that daydream is.

The ocean, I thought. The trees outside our windows cut off as a soy bean field emerged, till lines shimmering beneath the afternoon sun. *We are far away from the ocean.*

You cornered me as soon as we got home in the hallway that connected our bedrooms.

“Why are you in my head?” you demanded. Mom and Dad were still busy unloading the heaviest luggage.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Get out.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re not even trying.”

“You try first.”

For a second, I thought you were going to tell Mom. Or, if you were truly angry, Dad. *She’s in my head,* you’d say. *She won’t get out.* In the end, however, you did neither of those things. *They’ll get angry. They won’t believe me.* And, quieter—*I can’t trust them.*

Something changed at dinner. Dinner that night was frozen pizza, stuffed crust. I remember because I couldn't stop staring at Dad as he ate. Dad always ate in a ravaging, uncontrolled way: head bent forward, mouth lunging out toward his food. He never took singular bites. No, he took two bites at a time, no pause in between, like a man who wanted to finish rather than taste. I could hear teeth meeting teeth each time. Watching him eat stirred a twisted, heavy anger in me. The kind of anger that was illogical and could only be absolved by something quick and brash: a thrown glass, a slap.

Watching Dad eat was not the only thing that conjured this anger. There were also the stream of sighs he released at the end of the day; his footsteps, heavy and lumbering. I was always alert to these noises, as if my nerves had been trained to pick them up. A bite, a sigh, a step—I could not help noticing every single movement. I hated every single movement.

For so long, I thought I was alone in this, this strange, irrational sensitivity. Then—

I hate him

I hate him

Stop it Stop it Stop it

When I looked over, your eyes were glued to Dad's teeth, closing once—twice on his pizza. Your eyes flickered to me.

She understands, you thought. A pause. You understand.

*

I remember how Dad wanted us to be incredible. He wanted us to go to Harvard, become doctors, win the Nobel Prize.

Each night after dinner, the dining table was promptly cleared for our textbooks: *Algebra: Structure & Method; Learning Geometry; An Introduction to Advanced Calculus*.

“Hard work pays off,” Dad would say. Sometimes, if we needed a little more motivation: “You don’t want to be homeless someday, do you? Do you want to go begging in the street?”

In terms of math, we were considerably ahead of our peers at school. None of my classmates were surprised by this. They frequently called me smart, even though I never showed anyone my test scores, and I rarely spoke in class. I found out why from a girl named Grace Davis during a lunch in fifth grade.

“Blondes are dumb, brunettes are smart, and black hair is the smartest,” Grace said, addressing the whole table. “My dad said so.”

Grace had blonde hair.

Despite what people said, I did not feel very smart. I heard you echo this thought once when your teacher called you gifted at a parent teacher conference. We weren’t smart like those kids in *Times* articles who read textbooks in their freetime for the sheer thrill of it. We were more so forcibly ushered ahead in the curriculum.

“Force is necessary,” Dad would say, often to Mom when she told him to go easy on us. “You have to force kids to do things or else they will never get anything done.”

Force, for Dad, was very literal: a push, a shove, a slap.

I remember an evening at the dinner table, chicken scratch on paper, red ink bleeding everywhere. There was a concept Dad was trying to teach us that we couldn’t understand. It was getting late. The orange lights seemed to soak into our skin. Dad was yelling. *Stupid!* he called us, his volume loud enough to strike a chord of danger in us the way fire alarms and tornado sirens do. *La ji! Sha gua! Mei yong!* He took a pause, clutching the back of a chair, his face

scrunched as if his heart hurt. Then he reached out and flung our textbooks at our heads. We ducked. The textbooks hit the wall, fell to the floor, and, no longer in flight, lay wrinkled and powerless on the hardwood. I wanted to reach out and smooth the pages. To soothe them.

Don't move, you thought. Not yet. Not worth it.

They called me smart at school, and yet, at the same time, they stared at me like I was wrong.

“Can she speak?” my kindergarten teacher, Ms. Layton, asked the first week of school. This was before the pool, before your voice. Ms. Layton had arranged a special meeting for just the four of us: her, Mom, Dad, and I. I was struck by her question. *Can she speak?* Of course, I wanted to say. Yet, my mouth didn't move.

“Of course,” Dad said instead. “Why couldn't she?”

“She hardly speaks in class,” Ms. Layton said. Her forehead wrinkled in concern. *Fake concern*, I thought. Mom and Dad always said that the only people in this world who truly cared for us were family. Family meant you, me, Mom and Dad. Others, Mom said, will always look out for themselves when it comes down to it. Ms. Layton was not truly concerned—she was just acting concerned for the sake of her job.

“Does she speak at home?” Ms. Layton continued to ask.

“Of course,” Dad said again. Dad's voice was always thick when he spoke English. Thick and rough, like the words didn't belong. Ms. Layton's back straightened as though she had reached an epiphany.

“Does she know English?” Ms. Layton asked. Her eyes darted over to Mom. Mom had not spoken after her initial, warbling *hello*, her voice sounding as though she were underwater.

“Yes, of course,” Dad said again. “She speaks English all the time when we’re at the store.”

I elected not to mention that, at the store, Mom and Dad standing helplessly behind me, speaking gave me power.

“Very well,” Ms. Layton said, looking unconvinced. I begged silently for her to stop talking. Dad was frowning now, deepening the familiar pattern of lines that made me nervous. I did not want Dad to get angry in public. I felt, as a child, that certain things were not to be said out loud. If they were, something fragile would rupture.

Dad did not get angry. Ms. Layton did not push either. Instead, she smoothed a smile onto her face and clasped her hands neatly on the desk.

“Perhaps she is just shy,” Ms. Layton said. “We’ll give her some time to adjust. See how things go.”

The next week, I was placed in ESL.

ESL met in a small, windowless room in the basement of the school. There were two other students: a boy my grade named Rohan and a girl a year older named Anna Maria. Ms. Cage was the teacher. On the first day, she drew a ribbed cage with green ink on the overhead projector. “See, that is my name,” she said. “Ms. *Cage*.”

We drew pictures of apples. Bananas. Cherries. We sounded out the words while pulling pink rubber bands—*Ah-pull. Bah-na-na. Chair-rhee*. Though the class was dull at times, I much

preferred our small trio to the regular classroom, where kids seemed to know each other from preschool, or had parents who were friends with each other at work. I particularly liked Anna Maria. She always smiled at me when I arrived, and I thought her smile looked very kind.

It was during the middle of the second semester that I was pulled from ESL. I stood by Ms. Cage while she spoke to Ms. Layton outside of the classroom.

“She doesn’t need this class,” Ms. Cage said. “She speaks English just fine.”

“But she hardly talks in class,” Ms. Layton responded. She glanced down at me and offered a quick smile. *Fake smile*, I thought. “Have you noticed a speech impediment, by any chance? Maybe she needs Speech.”

Ms. Cage shook her head. “Perhaps she is just shy,” she said.

The next week, I attended Speech. Speech was held one on one with Ms. Black in the woman’s office. I remember Ms. Black had Barbies lined all over the walls. Her office had a window, unlike ESL, and through the window, I could see the playground and the cemetery that lay just beyond it. For a week, I pulled rubber bands and pronounced words slowly, Ms. Black squinting at me, trying to discern an overbite, a lisp. A week later, Ms. Black had a similar conversation with Ms. Layton at the door of the classroom.

“She’s awfully quiet when she speaks,” Ms. Black said. “Maybe she is just shy.”

For two years after that, I was free from any speech therapies. In second grade, when they taught us how to send letters, I wrote a letter to Anna Maria and placed it in the mailbox outside my classroom. In the letter, I asked how she was doing and if she liked her new teacher. A week later, I bumped into Anna Maria outside the cafeteria as second grade was entering and third grade was leaving.

“I got your letter!” Anna Maria said. “I’m so happy you wrote to me!”

The line quickly swept her away, but she sent me one last smile.

The next year, third grade, was when I met Ms. Hunt. Ms. Hunt, I decided, also had a kind smile. She was young, twenty-three, and had just graduated from the college with a teaching degree. I liked the way she drew her fractions: with a sleek, slanted slash. I began writing my fractions that way at home. Dad quickly took notice.

“Why are you writing your fractions that way?” he asked, standing over me at the dinner table. I told him Ms. Hunt wrote them that way.

“Your teacher is stupid,” Dad said. I felt anger stir in my chest. A flat tire was stupid. A mosquito was stupid. A bad movie was stupid. I was stupid. Ms. Hunt, I thought, was above these things. She was better. When she smiled, it seemed genuine.

Nonetheless, I erased the fraction and drew an even, horizontal line. Across the dinner table hunched over your algebra textbook, you looked back down and let out a small exhale of relief.

It was towards the end of the first semester when the trees were becoming bare that Ms. Hunt pulled me aside. We sat in a nook next to the stairs. Recess was happening on the blacktop, everyone in their stiff coats. I was nervous for what Ms. Hunt had to say, but I was happy to miss recess. I didn't have anyone to play with.

“I just want to talk,” Ms. Hunt said. Mostly, she asked questions. What is your favorite subject? *Art*. Do you want to be an artist someday? *No*. What do you want to be? *A doctor*. Are either of your parents doctors? *No*. What does your mom do? *Nothing*. What does your dad do? *Teach*. Oh, where? *The college*. What does he teach? *Physics*. Oh, no wonder you're so good at math!

I nodded. Ms. Hunt adjusted the cuff of her sweater. I think now that she must have been taking a small moment to summon courage for her next few words.

“I just want you to know that you can talk to me about anything,” Ms. Hunt said. She leaned in close, and her clothes smelled like flowers. “Is everything okay at home?”

Mom and Dad had prepared me for this moment. “If they ask you when you go to bed, say eight-thirty,” Mom said, even though Dad sometimes kept us up past midnight at the dinner table. “If they ask you what you eat, say sandwiches and vegetables,” even though some days Mom could not summon the energy to prepare food. “If they ask you about your...” Mom could never bring herself to say *bruise*, “tell them you were roughhousing with your brother.

“You must answer these questions correctly,” Mom said. She leaned in closer, her eyes big, the pupils like the dark centers of whirlpools, sucking me in. “If you do not, they will take us away.”

Ms. Hunt’s question, however, was more general. Nothing about meal plans, nothing about sleep schedules. Just—*Is everything okay?*

I happened to have a bruise on my upper forearm that day, hidden by my wool sweater. Dad had hit me a few times with the TV remote, though only a bruise on the arm stayed. The bruise hurt, but only when I touched it. It was nothing compared to the horror stories some of my other classmates shared. I once overheard a boy at the lunch table say that, after his dad caught his teenage sister smoking, his dad made his sister eat the cigarette. I knew Dad would never make me do something like that. To make someone eat a cigarette was too premeditated. Too malicious. Dad’s punishments were quick. A strike. Something thrown. Yelling. Sudden, brash movements to release anger. That boy’s father, I thought, must have hated the sister. Dad didn’t hate us. He was just angry.

“You can talk to me,” Ms. Hunt said when I didn’t respond.

Years down the line, in a grocery store somewhere on the road to college, I would demand to know why Mom let Dad act the way he did. Mom was hunched over a large box of saturn peaches then, gingerly testing their tenderness with her fingertips. Dad was waiting outside in the car. They had fought on the drive over.

“How can you let him act like this?” I said, my voice rising slightly. “How can you let him act like a child? Look at me. Just *look at me.*”

Mom looked up then, not at me, but back and forth at the other shoppers, a small smile on her lips. “Do not talk so loud,” she said, hushed. “This is our story. Be quiet.”

Even then beside the stairs, Ms. Hunt staring at me kindly, I knew not to say anything. In the movies, secrets tear people apart, but in real life, secrets also keep people together. I feared that if I said something, our family would disintegrate. Dad would disappear. Mom would disappear. Then what? There would just be us lost in the middle of this country, forgotten amongst the soy fields, the hickory oak.

But that was all before. Before the pool. Before your voice.

I remember then, in fifth grade, a boy began following me on the playground. His name was Oliver, and he was taller than me by a head, though nearly as skinny as I was. I generally liked him, since he did not speak much to people other than his friends. But then, toward the middle of spring, I started noticing a long shadow following me on the playground. When I walked from the swings to the foursquare courts, he followed. When I walked from the four square courts to the basketball hoops, he followed. Not sure what else to do, I stopped one day,

planting my feet into the ground. His shadow stopped too. When he realized I had noticed him, he approached me. He began circling me.

“You,” he said, his voice low. “Speak. Why don’t you speak.”

Not a question. More of an accusation.

“Just say something. *Speak.*”

He circled me a few more times. When I continued to say nothing, he huffed and wandered away. I looked up, wondering if anyone had noticed. No one did. Our classmates were still playing. The supervisor’s eyes were trained elsewhere. I let go of a breath, telling myself that this was a one time incident.

The next day at recess, his shadow was back.

“Speak,” he said, circling me again. “Just speak, damn it.”

I wondered why he cared. Perhaps he was merely playing make believe—a ten year old boy pretending to interrogate. Were his friends in on it? Did they send him? Wandering silently around the playground, my face shrouded by my waxy, straight black hair, I must’ve played the spy then. A traitor on home territory.

“Why don’t you speak.” *Spill your secrets.* “Say something.”

Again, when I failed to respond, he huffed and drifted away. Without his gaze boring down on me, I became once again aware of your thoughts: *Who is she talking to?*

In the books, telepaths communicate flawlessly, as though telepathy is a mere two way radio. In reality, thoughts live in the moment and die almost immediately afterward, making telepathy more like two cars stopped side by side in traffic, windows down, music streaming from both stereos. Once in a while, by luck, the songs will be in the same key, the same tempo. Occasionally, the lyrics will appear to respond to each other.

Where did you go?

I'll be back.

On a rare day, the same song will be playing. Possibly in canon, possibly in sync. Most of the time, however, the songs are dissonant. One song sings in A minor, the other in C sharp. One song sings of love, the other of hate. Even just a few hundred feet apart, me on the playground, you in the third grade hall next to the gym, our thoughts were rendered meaningless. Moot without context.

But distance was not a matter a week later, when a shadow fell over us while we stood side by side at the front loop after school.

“Talk,” Oliver said. “Why don’t you talk.”

The question always bothered me. *Why don’t you talk*, he asked, as though it was a choice. As though I was playing coy and was actually brimming with words to say. Truth is, I was simply frozen. I was shocked by the foreignness of him, of all people. Until kindergarten, I had never truly met a stranger. We had no family friends, no relatives within visiting distance. When faced with a room full of my classmates for the first time, I froze. I was not too shy to say what I wanted to say because there wasn’t anything I wanted to say at all. Frozen, the brain stops working. Words are not produced, and therefore words are not spoken.

Though perhaps there are greater reasons for my silence than our isolation. After all, you grew up the same as I did, yet spoke just fine at school. As an adult, I’d read studies linking my silence to my heavy blinking, to the way I could never step onto the cold garage concrete before the door had fully risen. *I’ll die*, I’d think, standing on the wooden garage steps. *If I step onto the concrete now, I’ll die, Mom will die, everyone will die—and it’ll be my fault.*

The origin of such thoughts, according to the studies, is a combination of nature and nurture. Of experience and DNA. At times, I loathed the small sliver of difference that must've separated you and me, brother and sister. No one should be more like me than you, yet the sliver of difference rendered me silent.

If we were any other brother and sister, the silence would've separated us forever. Instead, we are who we are, and we bridged the gap with our voices.

So this is him, you thought, staring up at the tall boy who had been following me for weeks. Songs on the radio, falling into sync: *Now I understand*.

"Why don't you talk," Oliver demanded again.

"Because she has nothing to say," you stated, taking a step forward. Oliver looked taken aback, as though he hadn't even noticed you. You crossed your arms, staring up with all the bold force of a third grader.

"Whatever. What do you know," Oliver said, recovering. I spotted Mom's car entering the school parking lot. *Let's go. Let's go. Let's go.*

"I know everything," you said triumphantly. Oliver looked confused by your statement. Before he could respond, I dragged you by your sleeve toward Mom's car.

*

Just yesterday, as I was arriving home from work, I decided to drive past our house as though it were just another building. I wanted to view the house objectively: red brick, an overgrown dogwood, siding that needed powerwashing. I wanted to observe as a stranger.

I remember the time Mom was late to pick us up from school. When an hour passed and all the other kids had left, you began crying silently. *She's gone*, you thought.

I remember that, when Mom and Dad were in a good enough mood to joke over dinner, they'd lean over the table and ask us who we'd go with if they got a divorce tomorrow. Their eyes would glimmer beneath the orange light. It was their game, the one with hidden knives, and whoever you said, I'd say the opposite. I remember when the jokes turned sour, and Mom went storming out of the house, her car keys jangling as the garage door cranked open. I never looked at her as she left. I only listened to the sounds.

I remember that, on at least two weekends a year, we would drive two and a half hours east to St. Louis to buy live seafood. We went to SeaFood City on Olive street, where the seafood section in the back smelled like entrails and old salt. A large butcher's knife always thundered from somewhere, steady and methodic. Turtles swam in yellowed tanks. Frogs scrambled to perch at the top in an old, watermelon box, not knowing that by claiming the best seat, they were also making themselves the easiest prey. When someone ordered fish, the butcher would angle his knife at the chopping block and send a spray of scales all over the tiled floor, the scales nearly the size of ginkgo leaves.

Mom preferred blue crab. "None of this is good," she'd mutter, picking through the box of crabs with a pair of metal tongs. The crabs, like the frogs, all fought their way to the top, snapping legs if need be. "You should see the crabs back home," Mom would say, turning to me. "They're robust. Wild. They taste like the ocean. These..." she'd trail off, looking into the box of broken, wounded crabs. "These taste like a fish tank."

Mom came from the ocean, or rather an oceanside city in the Fujian province. Fish were caught the day-of, their gills still puffing when they were laid out on the vendor's ice. At the shoe shop where Mom worked, they swept live muscles through boiling water for lunch.

"I wish you could taste it," Mom said to me once as we waited for the St. Louis crab to steam on the stove. "Then you'd wish you lived by the ocean."

While Mom came from the ocean, Dad came from a city deeper within the province, where the ocean had narrowed into a river. There, he lived with his two sisters and his mother, helping them run the family business by day and studying mathematics alone by night. "That's why Dad's glasses are so thick," Mom used to say. "Because he's a hard worker." When they decided to flood Dad's village for a spillway, Dad moved to the city, where he met Mom. The courtship, according to Mom, was brief. In less than a year, they married and moved 8,000 miles away to Philadelphia. Then, a few years after that, to Colby. Dry, flat Colby, where the only water is a curve of the Missouri river. The ocean, the rivers, the land—I used to think they were why Mom and Dad fought.

I remember a return trip from St. Louis. I was eleven. You were nine. The crabs were already bought, rustling softly from a paper bag between the front seats. Due to another repair job in I-70, we had to take a backroad to get home. We never took the backroads if we could help it. Mom and Dad began arguing about direction.

"When I tell you to give me instructions, you have to give me instructions," Dad said, his face seized up in anger. *Sour... homesick...* you thought. You were describing how you felt.

"You can't expect me to be that fast," Mom said, still tracing a finger through the atlas. The pages were long sunburnt from sitting on the dashboard of the car, the printed words nearly indecipherable.

“Look up the streets ahead of time,” Dad said.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking a wrong turn.”

“You’re not the one driving.”

I began thinking of Venice. Gondolas. A landless world.

“Hurry—do I take a right next, or a left?”

“Give me a second.”

Dad suddenly swerved the car. We all jerked in our seats. There was no one around—no one but fields of corn bracketing the sides of the road, their stalks brushing dryly in the summer breeze. When the car was aligned again, Dad started speeding down the road. He went seventy, eighty, eighty-five, ninety—

“Stop the car,” Mom demanded. Dad ignored her. Mom opened the passenger door.

Wind suddenly swept in, sending the paper bag of crabs into a wild flutter. The car curved slightly. I could smell summer air. A rapid *I’m going to die I’m going to die I’m going to die* tore through your head, even though we weren’t going to die. No—after cursing, Dad pumped on the brakes until the car jolted to a complete stop. In the next moment, Mom grabbed her purse and exited the passenger’s seat. Her heel knocked against the car door as she left, sending a tin of change we kept for toll booths spilling out onto the asphalt. The coins glittered beneath the summer sun. Mom slammed the door shut. The noise sounded final. She began walking.

She’s leaving, she’s gone, you thought.

No she’s not, I thought purposefully, using the kind of effort it took to summon the word *You*. I was not merely thinking, thoughts running away from me endlessly. I was speaking to you.

In the front seat, Dad began driving at Mom's pace. He rolled down the passenger window.

"Don't be ridiculous, are you going to walk all the way back home?"

Mom didn't reply. The back of her head faced us, stern and unforgiving.

"Come on. Get back in the car."

Still nothing.

"Ta ma de," Dad cursed, rolling up the windows. Suddenly, the car was back in motion, ripping ahead at sixty, seventy. We hardly had enough time to crane our heads back to catch Mom walking steadily ahead on the shoulder.

This is it, you thought. She's really gone.

You wanted to follow Mom out the car. Something had stopped you. *I need him*, you thought. *I need him to live.*

To live, as in, to survive. Mom was jobless, afterall.

You imagined a world then where Dad picked us up everyday after school and the house was always quiet. Dinner would be short. Homework would start early, end later. We might even become better, smarter people. More hardworking. More disciplined. But no one would tuck you into bed at night. No one would touch your hair. There would just be a rain of fists and *stupid, stupid, stupid!* without any wall of defense.

The crabs rustled in the paper bag.

But you have me, I thought. Like that day in the car, Mom swerving back and forth, I resolved to do something. I resolved I would never leave you behind. I would always wait. Wait for you to catch up, wait for you to know where you wanted to go. If you wanted to go somewhere no one else dared to, I would follow. I would not let you be alone.

Do you swear, you thought. You couldn't take another broken promise.

Yes, I thought. Yes yes yes.

I thought I was breaking ground with this promise. Our family, like so many other immigrant families, was born from separation. What did our parents know of staying together? But then, after what felt like hours of driving, Dad took a right, then another right, and another. We were traveling the perimeter of a cornfield. Billboards rose above, casting large plots of shadow on the road. After we took the fourth right, a familiar figure emerged on the shoulder, her black hair stark against the blue sky, the gold corn. She was still walking ahead, her pace calm and undeterred. She hadn't walked very far, I realized. The coins were still glittering only a few yards behind her. As we approached, Dad slowed the car and rolled down the windows.

"Come on," Dad said, his voice softer, almost muted. "Don't do this. Let's go home."

Mom slowed. Stopped. She still wasn't looking at us. Instead, she was looking ahead. Ahead at the endless corn, the towering billboards, the straight, broad road and where it touched the sky. Like a painting we were forever trying to walk into. A beat passed. Then Mom's shoulders softened, and she turned, her face visible to us once more. The look was not quiet troubled, not quiet relieved, but something in between—defeat, I would one day realize. She got back in the car. She took the atlas into her hands. There was a moment of silence.

"Go forward. Take a left at the second stop, and we'll rejoin I-70," she said.

*

I meant it when I said it: I would never leave you behind. At the mall, when Mom and Dad didn't notice you had stopped to tie your shoe, I waited. When you got drunk for the first

time at fifteen and needed someone to pick you up, I went. How could I leave you behind—you, close to me for reasons greater than nature and nurture. You, who could hear my every thought, my every meaning. I remember it. I remember it all.

The time at Worlds of Fun when you pretended to be scared of a rollercoaster because I was scared.

The time I grasped for words to describe a sunset, and you told me the sky was like a pomelo breaking open, the sun like the sun you see in postcards, hot and liquid.

The time Dad was screaming, fists ready to beat down, all because I didn't get the right answer. "It's so simple, why don't you *understand*," he demanded, voice strained like someone pleading for their life. I was frozen. I knew that, in seconds, threats would become reality. But then, quietly in my head, as though you feared being heard—*eight. Eight eight eight eight*—

"Eight," I said, and Dad halted, as though he had not expected me to get the right answer. "Eight," I said again, to make sure he had heard. *Eight*, a lifesaver. *Eight*, revenge. *Eight eight eight*.

The only time I could not hear you was Saturday afternoons, when Mom would pull out her paints and slide a vinyl onto the old turntable. She told me once that the turntable was the first real luxury she bought in America. Her family had one back home, but it was too fragile to take on the plane with her.

In my memory, honey light sinks through the kitchen windows, cutting bright squares on the hardwood floor. "Unchained Melody," Mom's favorite, fills the air. She stands before an old easel bought some years ago from a yard sale and dabs a splotch of orange onto a blank canvas. The air feels still, the afternoon slow enough to glimpse dust particles suspended in light. Mom spreads out the paint. She sways lightly with the music, her posture loose and lethargic. I watch

from her side, waiting to see the color take shape. In the background, the hum of your voice slowly begins to fade until, suddenly, you are gone.

II.

It's generally agreed upon that language resides in the left side of the brain, music in the right. The neurons on the left are large and myelinated, allowing for the kind of speed necessary for language processing. Neurons on the right, however, are smaller, slower, but more abundant, allowing for higher resolution. During college, I poured over dozens of studies researching the brains of musicians and learned of one exception to music's hemispheric divide: in the brains of the most veteran of musicians, music dominates in the left.

Music's effects don't stop there. Children who take up an instrument at an early age tend to have enlarged corpus callosums. Stroke patients who develop Broca's aphasia can use music to relearn speech. We don't just listen to music. We are changed by music.

Had Dad known music could restructure our very brains, perhaps he would not have taken me to the music store on my twelfth birthday. Upon stepping inside, I was hit with the rich scent of cherry wood as I took in the floor to ceiling displays of wood carved instruments. Violins perched up high, watching. Cellos stood sentry out front. Dad led me to the back, where a dark toned violin lay in a green cloth case.

"How does this one look?" Dad asked.

It looked big, far too big for a twelve year old, which the store clerk agreed with, but Dad purchased it anyway. "You'll grow into it, won't you?" he said, letting me carry my new violin out the store.

Never have I met an instrument that isn't at once grand and fragile. Each violin with its curves and scroll looks like it was crafted for royalty. So majestic it cannot possibly be injured. Yet, the slender throat, the delicate horsehairs of the bow—even temperature can warp the precise angles of the bridge. In a way, instruments are like wizened kings, invulnerable only because they are protected.

I kept my violin in its closed case on top of my dresser. In the weeks before I started lessons, I would open the case several times in one afternoon, brushing my fingers over the velvet lining of the case, then the curved wood of the instrument's edges. Gently, I'd pluck a string, then press my fingertips to the skin beneath my nose, taking in the rich, slow scent of the wood, the slight metallic twang of the strings. At twelve, the violin was the most valuable thing I owned. I admired it in secrecy. I touched it like the act was forbidden. Perhaps I already knew deep down that Mom and Dad did not want me to love the violin, but how can you play such a thing without loving it?

I began lessons after Dad found a flyer a college student had posted on campus. Evenings on Mondays and Fridays, Dad drove me up to the college, where Mike, a grad student studying music, instructed me in the cramped space of his apartment living room.

First, he taught me the open strings: G, D, A, E. We bowed the notes together, listening as the vibrations bounced off one another, amplifying the notes. Once I could steadily draw the bow across the strings, we moved onto scales. For weeks, my fingers ached from the hard press of the strings. "You'll get used to it," Mike said. Then he held up his left hand, the fingertips callused from years of use.

The first song I played was Hot Cross Buns. From a stack of papers nearly spilling off a shelf, Mike carefully removed a single sheet of music, the paper dinged at its edges, a few penciled annotations drifting over the bars. There were only two lines in total, but I felt an awe at being able to comprehend the dark markings on the page, as though, in Mike's crowded living room, I'd been inducted into a secret society.

Before I began playing, Mike removed a homemade CD from the shelf, slotting it carefully into a CD player that sat next to the metronome. "Listen," he said, and I did. I listened and my eyes followed every note on the page. In my head, I imagined anonymous, deft fingers dancing on the strings, the bow smooth and steady. When the music was over, it was my turn.

You know as well as I do how music can take over the body. How it drags something out of you—a jiggling leg, a sway, a tear. In college, I read about the sleeping sickness epidemic following World War I, learning that, over decades, the sickness's victims slowly petrified until they became both motionless and speechless. Like statues, they stared ahead in a trance. In a time before L-Dopa or any other kind of medication, the only reprieve was the music. Suddenly, stirred by the radio, or perhaps a live instrument, the patients could rise to dance.

Perhaps I was too locked into the music at first to notice. I was charmed by the timbre of every note and by the fact that I was creating them. When I came home from practice, you stared at me. *It's not Saturday. Mom isn't painting. Where did you go? Why did you leave me?*

What do you mean? I thought. I did not know then that I had left you.

"Let me try something," you said. It was an afternoon. Summer. School would resume in a few weeks. You were now the age I was when I first heard you.

“Try what,” I asked.

The music, you thought, beckoning me to follow you into the living room. Mom and Dad were both in their bedroom taking an afternoon nap. In the living room, Mom’s turntable sat on the bookshelf next to a few worn looking albums. I was still taller than you then, though only by a few inches, and so I reached up to slide the turntable off the shelf. “Unchained Melody” was already sitting on the platter.

We took the turntable into my room. Sitting together on the carpet, you plunked the needle onto the edge of the record. You gave me one last look. *Listen*. Then you flipped the start lever.

The first few gentle notes of “Unchained Melody” drifted up into the air, and I could see Mom painting at her easel, the sunlight orange and raw against her back. I thought I could smell thick waves of oil paints. Your hand suddenly stopped the needle.

“Well?” you asked. I said nothing. You already knew the answer. Then, like true scientists, we moved on to my violin. I grasped the instrument gently by its neck and base, as though it were a child, then brought it up to my collarbone. Your eyes followed my actions closely. Your fingers flexed, as if wanting to touch the smooth curves of the instrument.

Beautiful, you thought. *Fragile*.

I played the first few measures of Bach’s Minuet No. 1. There was no sound but the music. Not a murmur of your voice. Even after we recognized this, I continued playing until the song was over.

I want to do that, you thought. *I want to make silence*.

You told Dad that night that you wanted to begin lessons as well. Dad was ecstatic. But, because we could only afford two lessons a week, Dad decided to make my Friday lessons with Mike yours instead.

“It’s not easy, you know,” I said later that evening as we completed our chores in the kitchen. “Playing the violin.”

I said this to deter you, not because I thought you were incapable—you stood out in any subject you pursued, often to a greater extent than I did—but because I felt an instant, protective surge over my violin. I wanted something special, something mine. Even more so, I wanted the power over silence to be mine and mine alone.

You studied me for a moment. You must have heard what I thought.

“I’m not going to leave you alone,” you said. I flushed.

“I wasn’t worried about that.”

“Liar.”

I joined orchestra at school that year. Through orchestra, I met Hannah, my stand partner.

“Are you Chinese?” was the first thing she asked me. I said yes. I had never had class with another Chinese girl until then, and I was horrified that we wound up stand partners. The teacher repeatedly called me Hannah. The other kids asked if we were sisters.

Within a few weeks, however, I stopped minding the comparisons. Hannah was new to Colby, and so I liked her. She didn’t know how quiet I was in elementary school, how my quietness made everyone avoid me.

Hannah's family was from California. Sacramento, specifically. Her father was an engineer and had followed his work all the way over to Colby. Her mother soon found a job in one of the university labs working as a research assistant. In between songs, Hannah talked nonstop about Sacramento.

"I'm going to move back there as soon as I have a job," she declared. "I'm going to become an artist. They have great art schools in California, you know."

Within a month, she invited me over to her house. I had never been over to another person's house before. Mom made sure to instruct me on etiquette.

"As soon as you see her mother, say Aiee hao."

"Aiee hao," I repeated.

"Now, Shu shu hao."

"Shu shu hao."

"Good," Mom said. She thrust a bag of washed cherries into my arms. "Give this to them."

The Lis lived in one of the new, pristine subdivisions that had began cropping up on the far edges of town. Many of the houses were empty, and the filled ones looked empty in their own way—clean, sterile, unused. I couldn't imagine the Lis living in a house like that. I thought they would be like us: old vomit and juice stains on the carpet, the last sepia remnants of blood hidden behind clocks, beneath furniture. At the very least, books and mail and toys scattered all throughout the household because no one had the energy to pick them up. Because cleaning things up would only be setting the stage for destruction to occur again.

But the Lis' house was immaculate. They had fake fruit on the coffee table and delicate porcelain knick knacks on the fireplace mantle. Mrs. Li was warm and offered me fresh steamed

sweet potatoes as soon as I stepped foot in the house. Then she set the cherries I'd brought in a homemade pottery bowl.

"Just a little snack before dinner," Mrs. Li said. Hannah and I ate sweet potatoes and cherries together as Mrs. Li prepared dinner in the kitchen. Hannah had suddenly turned quiet, glancing up at me periodically over her sweet potato. She seemed a little nervous, but I couldn't tell what for. Her house was beautiful.

After our snacks, Hannah took me downstairs to see the basement. In a special room off of the den, her parents had built her a practice room where a grand piano, the lid closed, stood in one corner, an empty music stand in the other. The violin case she brought to school everyday sat on top of a low shelf. Hannah took a seat at the piano bench.

"Do you want to listen?" she asked.

"Sure," I said.

Mr. Li arrived shortly before dinner. Mr. Li was both shorter and smaller than Mrs. Li, which I hadn't expected. He greeted me with a nod and a smile when he saw me, then pressed a kiss to Mrs. Li's forehead. I stared. I'd forgotten to say "Shu shu hao."

Mr. Li was quiet. Not loud and confident the way Dad was. He ate with his head bowed a little, as though he didn't want us to see him chew. Both Mr. Li and Mrs. Li asked me questions. It was all very quiet, very peaceful. I found myself glancing up every now and then at Mr. Li. I tried imagining him angry. How could he win a fight against Mrs. Li, I wondered, when he was so much shorter, smaller, quieter?

"People hide what they are really like," Mom once told me. She said it after I complained on a drive home from school one day that the other kids didn't have to do extra homework at

home. “Especially that new girl, Hannah? Her father is just like yours at home. Trust me. He just doesn’t let it show when you are over. All Chinese parents are like this.”

Mom then told me about her sister, our Aiee. Aiee had recently retired because her son—our cousin—secured tenure at Beijing University. In my memory, Mom and Dad always spoke highly of Aiee. They admired her disciplinary force and her dedication to her son. According to Mom, Aiee would arrange dinners with her son’s teachers in middle school to maintain good connections with the teachers. It all paid off when her son got into a top university for undergrad. “It wasn’t just dinners,” Mom said. Mom told me that Aiee hit him. She hit him if he delayed doing his homework or snuck out with friends. She hit him with rulers, with rolled newspapers, or with the flat of her palm if there was nothing else available. Mom told me that Aiee would hit him until he cried so loud that the entire apartment complex could hear, and then some more, until his sobs started to fade as he realized crying would do no good. Only once he quieted and returned to doing his homework did she stop. The other parents admired her because they knew hitting her son hurt her too.

“If you slack off, Hannah will catch up to you. Then she will be better than you.”

I tried imagining Mr. Li taking a ruler to Hannah’s skin. What sound would she make? What sounds would *he* make? Would sounds of exertion escape his lips, or would he keep his mouth pinched shut, because hitting her was ultimately a task, a chore?

Whenever I imagined Aiee hitting a younger version of our cousin, the situation was always oddly controlled. There was purpose behind Aiee’s slaps. There was composure in her shoulders. If Mr. Li hit his daughter at all, I imagined he’d do it the way Aiee did it in my mind: with purpose and control. He wouldn’t be inconsolable, distributing fruitless pain without meaning.

He is nothing but a child, you thought. You had been listening to me. *It's a child's anger.*

A child's anger, made dangerous in an adult body. You were but a child then, yet you knew. That was the first of many times I heard you call him a child.

The Lis' house, with all its cleanliness, its precious porcelain decorations—I realized then why I couldn't imagine Mr. Li taking a wild swing at Hannah: he was a grown man.

* * *

The year I turned fourteen was the year Dad swept the turntable off the living room shelf, the needle snapping in half as it hit the wall. Dad kept shouting as Mom knelt down on the living room floor, gently holding the turntable as though it were a wounded face. I cried that time. I don't know why. I had not been hit. It was not me that Dad was angry with. But I cried. Mom and Dad came to a halt.

“Why are you crying?” Dad asked, his voice half accusing, half unsure. I didn't reply.

Because it doesn't end, you thought. *Because it feels like drowning.*

For Christmas that year, Dad bought two MP3s. One for Mom, and one for us to share.

Once the holidays passed and the snow cleared, we biked down to the library, knapsacks slung over our backs. Before then, we never had reason to wander into the CD section of the library. Suddenly, there was a whole new world of jewel cases for us to explore. There was a five

CD per library card limit, and we reached the limit each time. At home, we learned how to burn the CDs, a slow process we completed in the basement while playing video games.

We agreed to exchange the MP3 every other day. That meant, for three or four days a week, your thoughts would disappear intermittently. After school, as you rode home on the schoolbus, you listened to music. At night, lying in bed, you listened to music. There were also Fridays, when you went to Mike's for lessons, as well as each evening before dinner, when you practiced the violin. My thoughts suddenly had time alone.

There was a boy at school I liked to think about. I don't remember his name, though I do remember what he looked like: dark haired, milky skin, eyes that say he doesn't need you. The kind of boy you'd imagine having moles dotting his shoulders, his back. He was a bit reclusive, but popular because the girls found him attractive. Even Hannah, who had fallen into a bit of a tomboyish phase, spoke about him when we ate lunch in the library. With a sly look on her face, she said he'd look hot making out with the then captain of the football team. Her words triggered my imagination. I began thinking about him with other girls, or other boys. Sometimes, I was the other girl, or the other boy. Sometimes, there was just himself. Sometimes, I was him.

My daydreams grew even more vivid when I had the music. Lying in the dark, music cradled in the cusp of my ear, I envisioned falling in love, falling out of love. Even songs about heartbreak made me wish I had someone just so I could miss them.

Music in the dark is different from music on the radio. In the dark, you are alone with the music. You can run through a whole album, not just the singles. The music gains texture and dimension. Normally static congested on the radio, the song now reveals a hidden scattering of chimes behind the chorus. The album becomes a story. *You, you*, the singer croons. Sometimes *I*,

sometimes *her*; *him*, but most often *You, you you!* You fall in love. You heal from heartbreak. You live a life in the dark, and all around you, it is silent.

I never really thought about what you imagined in your time alone until, one night, I slipped the headphones off and suddenly you were there. You were picturing grand stages warmed by big, gold bulbs and music thrumming from the guitar strings beneath your fingers, even though you've never even touched a guitar. Before you, a crowd cheered, their voices a dull roar beneath the music. Their heat was palpable. Then, suddenly—

Get out!

I flinched, shoving the headphones back over my ears. The stage, the bulbs, the crowd—everything disappeared.

Throughout the first year of the MP3, we only broke our schedule once. We were doing homework that night, seated across from each other at the dinner table. Dad had risen from his seat. His face was red. We were both stuck on the same problem in the textbook. Dad had already yelled, had already shoved our shoulders, each shove growing harder. My forearm was still buzzing with the warmth of a smack. We had reached the intermission, the moment in every fight when Dad grew exhausted. After a deep breath, Dad offered incentive.

“Whoever answers this problem first can leave early,” he said. His hands were gripped tight around the back of a chair. He had that face on again—eyes scrunched tight, forehead knifed—as if the anger pained him. As if *we* were the ones hurting him.

I stared dumbly at my scratch paper. Clumsy long division stared back. My mind was stuck, unable to proceed forward. I wanted to disappear. To somehow become obliterated. Once destroyed, perhaps I would become indestructible.

But you were not stuck. You were scribbling on your scratch paper. *Two, carry over the four...*

I listened. My heart beat faster. I tried to keep my mind distracted. I thought about other things, anything—the painting on the wall, the photograph in the textbook. My pencil scribbled nonsense onto the paper. When a number finally rang in your head—*seventy two!*—I opened my mouth.

“Seventy two,” I said. Your head snapped up. There was no hiding the guilt that stirred in my gut. You knew what I had done.

I hate you, you thought.

“You can go,” Dad said, not offering me a second glance. I quickly closed my textbook and scuttled off. In the safety of my bedroom, I listened to your thoughts of pain, of anger. I ignored the dull slap of of fist meeting flesh.

Later that night, as I was about to go to bed, I couldn’t find the MP3, even though it was my turn to use it. I realized where it had gone when I lied in bed and found myself alone with my thoughts.

For the next few weeks, you kept the MP3, and I didn’t dare say anything about it. I was secluded in silence. Never had the silence been so maddening, so isolating. I looked at you as

you did your schoolwork at the kitchen table, earbuds plugged in. I had no idea what you were thinking. I couldn't stand it. I needed to know if you felt the same.

In the moments you were not listening or playing music, I was *she, her*. Not once *you*. I didn't deserve the effort of *you*. You only thought of me in passing remarks: *she's setting the table; she's in the way*. Never once did you reveal an ounce of regret at the silence. Outloud, we didn't speak unless we had to. You began spending more time after school at your friends' houses. I stayed at home because, besides for Hannah's house, there wasn't anywhere else for me to go. The days were tense. Frigid. I felt the kind of unease that grows unbearable not because of its intensity, but because of its duration.

I realized the true severity of what I had done when, early one morning, with nothing in the air but the hazy seven AM silence, you thought to yourself: *One day, I will find something I am good at. Then I won't have to rely on them for money. I won't have to rely on them for anything.*

Them. The word cut me. In my head, there was always *us*, then *them*. *Them* was Mom and Dad. *Them* was everyone else: teachers, friends—people who could sympathize, but never understand. To *them*, how you hurt will always be too much or too little. It isn't the physical hit that stays with you, but the loneliness. The loneliness of no one knowing exactly what you mean. Exactly how you hurt.

I tried to not think about your words, because I didn't want you to know I was listening. I knew I had to apologize. I couldn't be a *them*. If I became a *them*, I would have no one.

"I'm sorry," I said later that morning, while crossing paths with you on my way to the bathroom. The apology was succinct, just as I knew you would like it.

"Okay," you said. You moved to pass me.

“No, really,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

You gave me a brief, studying look. *That doesn’t change what she did.*

“Whatever,” you said, your words betraying you. “I don’t care. Just don’t do it again.”

*

My sophomore year of high school, I took a job at Jingo’s near the university. I saved enough that, for the first time, I could buy you a real present for your fourteenth birthday. I asked you what you wanted.

“You can just give me money,” you said. So I did. Then, the week after your birthday, you purchased a second hand acoustic guitar online. Mom and Dad were shocked. The guitar made them realize something. At the dinner table that night, they brought it up:

“The guitar,” Mom said. “What do you plan to do with it?”

Mom was asking, but it might as well have been Dad speaking from the intensity with which he awaited your answer.

“I plan to learn it,” you said. *I want to love it.*

“Learn it for what?” Mom continued.

“Learn it to learn it,” you said.

They’re trying to bait it out of you, I thought.

“What are you gaining from learning it?” Mom asked. She didn’t wait for a response.

“Do you want to become a musician, like Mike?”

You said nothing, but I heard you nonetheless: *yes, yes, yes.*

“Finding a career in music is really difficult these days,” Mom continued. “I’m only speaking the truth. It’s not all just playing music. After Mike graduates from school, he’ll probably have to get a job in teaching, and teaching is hard work.”

Your eyes shifted over to Dad. Their game had changed a little bit since we were young. Instead of leading the conversation, Dad merely supervised it. Mom was the messenger. Dad was the mastermind. He was always watching, listening, his silence proof of his approval. If we were to get angry, we would logically get angry at Mom. It was all his perfect ploy. But years of experience allowed us to catch up quickly to the rules of their new game. Seated at the dinner table, your eyes didn’t stray from Dad.

“What do you think, Dad?” you asked. There was a hardness in your voice. Dad looked up, feigning surprise at your direct address.

Like a child, you thought.

“I don’t see any harm in learning the guitar—do *you*?” Dad asked, looking at Mom accusingly. Mom’s gaze darkened, the divot between her eyes deepening. She said nothing.

I already knew then that you had bigger plans with music. During school hours, or while doing homework after dinner, I sometimes caught you daydreaming about the heat of a stage lamp, or an audience spread out wide in the darkness of an auditorium. As soon as you sensed that I was listening, you would divert your thoughts elsewhere.

For the next year or so, you plunked away at the guitar in the basement. In the beginning, you merely strummed chords. Then I started catching short, familiar motifs, usually the Beatles, or sometimes Coldplay. One evening, on my way down the stairs to fetch you for dinner, I even heard you singing, your voice soft, tentative. You did not want to be heard. I let my steps grow heavier, alerting you of my presence before I approached the landing. Your singing stopped, and

when I peered through the doorway, you were hunched over your guitar, your gaze lazy and relaxed as if nothing had happened. *Why keep this from me*, I wondered. *What is there to lose?*

Junior year passed quickly. Most of my time was spent studying for the SAT. You had finally entered high school, and I'd cross paths with you every now and then in the hallways. There was a small group of guys you hung out with, all with the brazen look of teenage boys trying to prove themselves. When you didn't greet me in the hallway, I shrugged it off. It meant nothing, I told myself. I was playing the part of the older sister who knew better.

Then the summer after junior year arrived. I was seventeen. You were fifteen, soon to be sixteen. The heat landed early that year, bringing along with it a swarm of cicadas that soon littered the ground. That was the summer I began driving, and each time before Dad and I headed out, we had to sweep their heavy bodies off the windshield.

I was supposed to learn driving the summer after sophomore year, but I kept delaying, telling Dad I was too busy each time he offered to take me out. Hannah had already gotten her license, and with it, she began driving into town for lunch rather than eating in the cafeteria. Whenever I had to hitch a ride with her, she asked why I hadn't gotten my license. Truth was, I imagined driving to be a nightmare. If Dad could not tolerate my mistakes during homework, there was no way he would tolerate my mistakes while driving, when our lives were on the line. "I'm just busy," was what I told Hannah. The small hope I held in middle school that she would understand our lives was long gone by high school.

But driving, in the end, was not nearly as horrible as I imagined it. Dad taught me how to drive in the outskirts of town, where black vultures nestled comfortably on the road, and the

occasional gravel path kicked clouds of dust into the air, leaving the surrounding trees blanched, as though we had entered an old film. Sometimes, we drove north toward the river, where all the land bordering the road would flood after a week of rainstorms, leaving the road to appear as though it crossed a timid ocean. There, tall, sturdy oaks rose out of the water like ancient, wooden sea monsters, petrified as they were rising for air.

Both of us staring ahead, the vents blowing stiff air at my knuckles, we talked. We talked about things we read on the news, things that were happening at school, at work. We talked in a way we never talked at home. Our conversations were slow, comfortable. Most often, we talked about my plans for the future. Where did I want to go to college? What did I want to study? What did I want to do?

I knew what Dad wanted me to say, but at his last question, I always thought of the evenings I spent in Mike's apartment, the living room dim save for two lamps—one next to the shelf of CDs, and another right behind the music stand, splashing the sheet music in an orange glow. Sometimes, the metronome would be on, ticking a clean, unwavering beat, even if my fingers were stumbling over the notes. Mike's living room always smelled faintly of rotting wood, covered up by air fresheners doubling as paper weights. "Listen," he'd say each time he introduced a new song, raising his instrument up to rest against his collar bone with a grace I sought to imitate. When he was finished, it would be my turn, and we went back and forth like that, passing an entire lesson with only a few words exchanged. I enjoyed the music, but I was more mesmerized by the physics of it: the acoustic resonance, the small, minute shivering of the strings, the friction of bow hair against metal. Mike's eyes would close, as if entranced, and my mind would fill with silence... how could music do that, reaching through the air as if to control our very neurons? How was something I could not touch more powerful than I was?

These were the questions I wanted to pursue.

Then say it, you thought once while you were listening. Just say it outloud.

I never got up the courage. Sometimes, though, I thought Dad knew. That he was asking just to prod the answer out of me. Or maybe he didn't know, and he just wanted to hear the answer he wanted to hear.

"A doctor wouldn't be so bad," I found myself saying.

On a drive near the river once, Dad told me about the time when he was ten and a mathematician came to stay at his house. "He was famous," Dad said. "His photo was on the newspaper, and all our neighbors wanted to know what he was like." In the afternoons, when the mathematician had left for town, Dad would sneak into the mathematician's room to read over the mathematician's work, which the man laid out on his desk.

"When he finally caught me," Dad said, "I thought he was going to shoo me out, but instead, he asked me if I wanted to learn."

In the month that the mathematician stayed, Dad learned how numbers could form poetry. "At first, you must learn the rules," Dad said, "but in the end, the rules begin forming themselves." He spoke of proofs and laws and how the shape of a flower could be carved from an equation.

"My parents wanted me to run the family store," Dad said, "so I came to America instead. I thought here, I could study what I truly wanted." I would learn from Mom years later that Dad's father was dying of liver cancer at the time he left.

Thinking back, Dad and I only had these kind of conversations in the car. The sky dim, both of us staring ahead. I wonder, now, if he was afraid to look at me. How many secrets has he not told me, simply because I was looking into his eyes?

One time, we drove in the evening, when the sky was turning a dark blue. Our headlights casted a hazy orange glow onto the road. When we passed the last traffic light and headed out into the country, Dad began telling me more.

“I told my dad I would do research at a top university,” Dad said. “My dream was to win the Nobel prize.”

But then Mom and Dad landed in Philadelphia, where they boarded with a friend of a friend, who owned a laundromat. While Dad was busy applying to graduate schools, Mom waitressed. She became familiar with the smell of grease in her hair, had her first glass of root beer, became sick of root beer, and fixed dinners out of whatever was rejected from the restaurant—broccoli stems, the hearts of mangoes, bones that could be used for soups.

“One night,” Dad said, “while I was walking your Mom home, a drunk man approached us with a gun.”

Dad said the man waved it around sloppily, not demanding them of anything, but not letting them pass either.

“Now that I think about it,” Dad said, “it was rather dangerous.”

I looked out the window, watching houses pass by now and then from behind the trees. It was that last hour in the evening when the sky could still be considered blue. Most people had already turned on their lights, but had yet to shut their windows.

In those bright, orange squares lay a world. Spice bottles lined against the windowsill. Stacks of books, a flower vase—empty. People moved about, making dinner, feeding their dogs. In some houses, the lights were all off, only a TV blinking its warmthless light. At home, Mom and Dad always made sure we shuttered our blinds early. “Can’t have people looking in,” Mom would say, ushering me to make my rounds through the house.

“Of course, I didn’t win the Nobel prize,” Dad said. No, in the end, Dad earned his doctorate then accepted a job teaching physics at the one school in the country that didn’t mind his broken English. “Of course, I’d rather be researching mathematics, but I am happy. Sometimes, to live a stable life, you can’t do what you want to do.”

Slowly these days, I remember more stories Dad told. Like how, in front of the laundromat one night, gunfire broke out. Mom and Dad began to get up, but their friend stopped them. “Keep the light off,” he said. “Just wait.” So they waited. They waited for the gunfire to end. For the sirens to end. For the gunfire to end again. They waited until they could only hear their own breathing.

“Do you ever wish you didn’t come here?” I asked. Dad paused.

“For myself? Sometimes. For you and your brother? Never.”

If you were listening to my thoughts then, all you would have heard was *I’m sorry. I’ll do it right. I’ll start things over.*

*

Having learned Dad’s secrets, I became curious about Mom’s too. On a trip to the grocery store, just the two of us in the front seats, I asked her if she would return home if she could.

“*Home* home,” I said to clarify. Mom drew in a long breath.

“I don’t think I could go back now,” she said. “I’m too used to living here, but if you had asked me ten years ago, then yes. I would go back.”

I was the one who brought up the question, and yet I felt betrayed. I thought she would say something about how she did miss home, but wouldn’t go back for our sakes.

“When I first got here,” Mom continued, “here, to Colby, I felt...”

She trailed off, searching for a word. She settled on starting a new sentence.

“Everything was too flat,” she said. “Too small. There was nowhere to go on weekends. Nothing in the horizon. Philadelphia at least was a city, but here—”

Her hands remained on the steering wheel, but she might as well have gestured out beyond our windshield at the blue summer sky, which hung low with nothing but the slouched trees to prop it up.

“—here it’s just so, so empty.”

For a long time afterward, I thought Mom was talking about the land. I didn’t consider until years later that she might have also been talking about a lack of people. Of our people. Aunts, uncles, grandmothers.

“Isn’t there anything you like about here?” I asked. I desperately needed to know that she was at least a little happy here. Mom’s forehead wrinkled in thought.

“Well, there’s a lot of land,” Mom said. “When I was little, we always played by the ocean. Me and my classmates. But the ocean can be dangerous.” She paused. “One of my classmates drowned, once. A boy my age.”

I sat up straighter.

“Did you see it?”

Mom shook her head.

“Drowning is too quick to see,” Mom said. “One moment they are there, and the next, they are just gone.”

We sat in silence for a moment, Mom reliving a scene, me imagining one. I envisioned a small, dark haired boy in the ocean, there one moment, then gone the next—swept away, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I imagined all his friends standing at the shore, confused as to where he had gone.

“So its good that there’s no ocean here,” Mom finally said, sounding like she was concluding an essay. “I don’t have to worry about you two drowning.”

*

I passed my driving test mid-June. Soon after I received my license, you began pestering me to take you to band practice.

“Band practice?” I asked, testing the word out on my tongue. I wasn’t sure if I had said those two particular words together before then. “Where? With who?”

“Booker. Fulton. Blair,” you said. You gave no explanation to those names.

“I’m not even supposed to have passengers,” I said.

“Mom and Dad don’t know that,” you said. Then, more coldly than you had to, “Almost twenty years here, and they still know nothing.”

“Why can’t you just ask one of them to drive you?” I asked. You knew why I was asking. *I* knew why I was asking. As an answer, you simply rolled your eyes.

Practice was held at Fulton's house. Fulton was a sixteen year old white kid who lived in the Highlands and played drums. On Thursdays and Saturdays after dinner, I drove you fifteen minutes over to Fulton's house. "I'm going to band practice," you said the first time before stepping out of the house. That was how Mom and Dad found out you were in a band. The declaration was simple and rational sounding. Before Mom and Dad could even form a word, you were already out in the garage.

When I was alone with Mom or Dad, they asked me to reason with you.

"He's taking too much time away from schoolwork," Mom said, Dad nodding silently in the background. "Playing music with friends is good, but it ultimately doesn't lead anywhere."

"Why don't you tell him yourself," I said.

"We don't want to push too hard," Mom replied.

"You've never been worried about that before."

Mom glanced at Dad. "You are both older now."

As I was driving you to practice the next week, I thought I'd at least give Mom's words a try for no reason other than obligation. You spoke before I even had the chance to open my mouth.

"Don't. Stop doing everything they tell you to do."

I was offended by this, your assumption that you were alone in your revelation of independence, but I kept my mouth closed. I played the part of the big sister again, telling myself that you were fifteen and just trying to be bold. I dropped you off without saying another word.

Your bandmates—Fulton, Booker, and Blair, remained a mystery to the rest of us. Whenever Mom and Dad asked who your bandmates were, you tersely replied, "Even if I said their names, you wouldn't know them." When picking you up from practice, I sometimes caught

glimpses of them in the dim orange street lights. Fulton, tall and gangly. Booker, athletic and handsome. There was also Blair, the redheaded girl who drove a blue Chevy.

Over dinner one evening, you announced that the band would be practicing in our basement for the next two weeks. “Fulton’s parents are painting the basement. I said we could use ours.”

“You’re spending a lot of time with that band,” Mom said. There it was again—the timidity.

“So can I use the basement or not?”

“As long as it is only for two weeks,” Mom said.

Next Thursday, six o’clock sharp, three cars pulled up on our driveway. We had never had other people at our house before. For the first time in a long time, Mom tidied up the house. I did some cleaning in the areas that she missed: the bathrooms, the hallways. I did so quietly, as though ashamed that I was doing so. While I cleaned, I thought of Hannah’s house.

When your friends finally arrived, I didn’t see them at all. I was boarded up in my room trying to finish an English essay. I saw through the blinds a familiar blue Chevy. A girl—Blair, orange hair, Wurlitzer case in hand—stepped out and onto the sidewalk, her shoulders slightly uneven from the weight of the case. She was far enough that I could not fully pinpoint where she was looking, but her chin was tilted up, as though she were performing a cursory sweep of the front of our house. I wondered what her eyes lingered on.

Perhaps a little cautious of Mom and Dad’s reactions, you kept the amps turned low in the basement, though nothing could really be done about the drums. Practice lasted nearly two hours. Then, just as suddenly as they had come, your bandmates left.

When Saturday came, I waited near my window for the blue Chevy to pull up. I told myself that Blair was just another one of those girls—girls I was slightly transfixed by, perhaps because I wanted to emulate their gait, their glances. There had been plenty of them throughout the years: Anna Maria in elementary school, a girl named Kayla Stamps in middle school—and, for a strange, brief month my freshman year of high school, Hannah.

When Blair arrived, I watched again as she lugged the Wurlitzer out the backseat of her Chevy. Her chin tilted up again, and I swore her face turned directly to face me. I would've been invisible behind the thick mosquito netting with light still left in the sky, but I stepped away from the window as though I'd been caught.

“So you're the sister.”

Her first words to me. It was Thursday again. Practice was running long. Blair had come up for a glass of water. She caught me in the kitchen searching for a snack. My first thought was that her voice sounded soft. Softer than I'd imagined. I didn't realize until then that I had imagined her voice before.

“You're the keyboardist?” I asked in return.

“How did you know?” The way she said it didn't sound like a question, but I answered her anyway.

“I hear drums and guitar, so...”

The muffled sound of cymbals and electric guitar floated up through the floorboards, repeating the same motif over and over again. “No, no, your beat is off,” your voice said, interrupting the music. Blair took a sip of her water. She stood on one side of the kitchen counter.

I stood on the other. I noticed that she was an inch or two taller than me. Then I reminded myself that I had come into the kitchen for snacks and began rummaging through the closet for something salted.

“You play anything?” she asked.

“Violin,” I said. “I could survive on the cello.”

An uncertain silence passed, and I emerged reluctantly with a bag of pretzels. My eyes met hers for a moment. She looked like she wanted to say something, but nothing came forth.

“Well. See ya,” I said. She offered a small smile.

“See ya.”

*

The tail end of summer is a bad time to fall in love. Everything feels like it is decomposing in upon itself. Overripe fruit snaps off the branch and rots in the tree’s shadow. Flowers grow too heavy for stems to support. The hydrangeas alongside the house take on the density of funeral arrangements. For the more delicate crops, it is past harvest season, and soon, the skies will darken, and there will be nothing ahead but cold. If you begin the relationship in summer, you must grow it in winter, and winter is no time to grow things.

Unless, of course, you don’t call it a relationship. Then the rules change.

Senior year arrived suddenly with no preamble. You turned sixteen a few weeks before school and passed your driving test soon after. You got a job at the local grocery doing checkout. Suddenly, our white, beat up Civic was always missing from the driveway. When the Civic was returned, there would be fast food bags littered in the back, sometimes plastic shopping bags.

The cupholders became stuffed with receipts and change. Your sudden mobility bothered me. I liked when you were dependent on me. Because I was your driver, I always knew where you were going. Now, you could disappear.

Since I no longer drove you to band practice, I no longer saw Blair. I didn't miss her *per se*, but I was suddenly and incredibly bored. I turned to college applications to fill my time. I intended to apply to schools primarily along the east and west coast. August was still early for applications, but I read the essay prompts anyway. *Why are you interested in attending _____?* I had no idea what to say. Dad offered advice. "Everyone is lying," he said. "Sometimes you have to lie to get what you need." To not lie, then, is to fall behind somehow. Throughout senior year, I lied and lied, painting an image of a dedicated, knowledge thirsty student. There were moments when I craved sincerity. *Then just be honest*, you thought. You always made it sound so simple.

I didn't see Blair again until the final week of August. It was third block, my free period, and I was walking to the media center to use the printer. She was coming down the hall.

"Hey," she said. Innocuous. I'd forgotten again how unexpectedly soft her voice was. "Long time no see."

"Long time no see," I repeated. "How's the band?"

"Good, good," she said. The hallway was startlingly quiet. "Are you in class?"

"No." I think it was the strange, breathy hope in my *no* that persuaded something in her. *She's just one of those girls*, I told myself again. *Their gait, their glance.*

It's more than that, you thought. *And you know it.*

"I was gonna head out," Blair said, jabbing a thumb toward the south doors. "Buy a soda, maybe. I don't know if you want to join..."

Her shoulders were relaxed, but she crossed her legs where she stood.

“Sure. Why not,” I said. I thought I saw a look of relief pass her face.

We decided on taking her car. The walk to the parking lot was quiet. The awkward sort, thrumming with uncertainty. I stayed a step behind her. She glanced back every now and then, her face baring that look she had that day in the kitchen, like she wanted to say something.

We approached a familiar blue Chevy.

“There’s some junk in the front seat. You can just throw it to the back.”

At seventeen, she was a year younger than I was and a year older than you were.

Naturally, our conversation deviated to discussing this difference.

“You know what you’re gonna do after graduation?” she asked me as we pulled out of the lot. She had slipped sunglasses on before starting the car, and when she turned to me, I couldn’t tell where she was looking. I was unnerved.

“College most likely,” I said.

“Here?” she asked.

“Probably not.” I looked out the window. There was nothing but the hayfield that stretched all the way to the grocery, its bales fat and large enough to seem alive. I always thought that the round bales appeared as though they were rolling across the fields—a trick of their spiraled shape, no doubt. Seemingly in motion, but undoubtedly sedentary. “I’d like to go somewhere along the coast,” I added.

I thought she’d say something perfunctory to that, just to carry on the conversation. An *oh, that’s nice*, or *the weather must be much better*. Instead, she looked over at me, smiling, and I saw that I was also smiling in the reflection of her sunglasses. I heard your voice loud in my mind: *You know what this is*.

Blair’s hand went to the radio dial.

“Music?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said.

We ended up at Andy’s. She ordered a vanilla custard with chocolate syrup and strawberries. I ordered a rootbeer float. Seated in the back of her pickup, the sun warming our shoulders, we talked about school. When we exhausted that topic, we moved on to music. I learned that Blair’s father was a musician and that he had taught her piano and guitar. I learned that Blair liked piano more, because she felt powerful standing over the keyboard. I learned that Blair’s parents divorced when she was ten, after which she moved to live with her mother and step-father, though her father still came by once a year to take her to a rock concert. Her favorite band was the Mountain Goats. As she scraped the bottom of her custard, she brushed a bead of sweat from her neck. I learned that she sweats most from the back of her neck, and she hates it because she can’t see how much she is sweating. Nonetheless, her favorite days were the hot, humid ones. “That feeling of too much heat,” she said, “and the air all pressurized in your lungs. It makes me feel real. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” I said.

We began hanging out regularly during third block. In the last week of August, we drove up to the river, parking in the gravel lot that belonged to Copper’s Landing. A heat wave crashed that week, and so the river was slower and low, the water even more opaque now that the mud was concentrated. The trees were dense with waxy green foliage, and a few cicada bodies still littered the soil. Since it was three in the afternoon, the hottest hour, there were no fishermen in sight. Just the river, nearly invisible off the sheer edge of the cliff.

We scaled down a steep dirt path to reach the shore. Like all teenagers, we gravitated towards the most elusive spot: a ledge of earth near level with the water, shrouded overhead and along its sides by old hickory oak. The shade was a relief, and the thick branches intertwining overhead felt like protection. We were in a hidden pocket of the world.

“My step-dad took me fishing here once,” Blair said. She had her toes lined up with the edge of our small piece of shore. Since the river bent on both sides, it was hard to tell how far the water stretched. “That was back when we were still trying to bond.”

Blair was wearing sneakers, shorts, and a fear fest t-shirt. Her hair was down, reaching the ends of her scapulas.

“I wasn’t so great at it. Fishing, I mean. I gut hooked the first one I caught.” A pause. “I hated it, because when I pulled it out of the water, blood was just spilling out of its gills. My step-dad said we had to take it home, since it was going to die anyway. He said it would be a waste to release it.”

I thought of the times when Dad took us fishing as kids. Catfish were the most exciting get, and I remember catching one not far from this ledge. The catfish was small, I remember, a bit too small for me to confidently grab it by the mouth, and so I grasped it by its belly, which was smooth, firm, and unexpectedly warm against my palm. Its fins were thin enough for the early colors of twilight to penetrate through. Dad believed in keeping all fish, and so I let it drop into our red bucket. Later that night, while watching the catfish breathe in a shallow basin of water next to our sink, I learned that catfish could make a gravelly whine, which sounded similar to human stridor. I didn’t know fish made noise. The stridor stopped, eventually, when Dad drove the blade of a scissor through its belly. Even once the fish had been gutted, its flesh still twitched, neurotransmitters having yet to run out in the flesh.

“So you took the fish home?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I let it go when he wasn’t looking. I mean, I knew it was going to die anyway, but...” She made a humming noise. “I guess that was the first sign that we wouldn’t get along.” She kicked the toe of her sneaker against the dry soil. “I still like this place though.”

I decided to admit something to her.

“Sometimes, I want to move far away, but when I look at this place, I want to stay,” I said. She turned around and smiled that smile again. The smile that meant we were on the same wavelength.

I needed to know if I was imagining things, so on an afternoon at the school library, the both of us studying for separate exams, I reached my hand up as she was speaking and briefly brushed my thumb against my lip, pushing slightly against the flesh. I gave the movement the informality of an afterthought. Her eyes followed. I tried not to smile. Then, a second later, her eyes flickered lower to my forearm. My sleeve had slipped down.

“That’s a bad bruise,” she said. Not a question, not a demand. Just a statement, inviting no reply. Sure enough, there was a large bruise beginning to yellow high up on my forearm. A homework related incident. Instead of brushing it off by stating that I had fallen and what not, I merely met her eyes.

There was a boy that year who got kicked out of his parents house after he came out. When it happened, everyone was talking about it. My lab partner in Chemistry was sympathetic.

She told me she was fine with boys loving boys, though she paused after and added that girls loving girls was just weird. I gathered that by ‘weird,’ she meant aesthetically unappealing.

I told Mom about this boy one afternoon in the car. I believe we were driving to get groceries. “The world is so much stranger now,” Mom said when I had finished. “When I was growing up, there wasn’t any of this.”

“Do you think it’s right, though?” I asked. “Kicking him out, I mean?”

“No,” Mom said, her voice sure. “You should never kick your own children out. What the parents should’ve done was help him. He needs help.”

“Help?”

“Yes. If I was his mother, I wouldn’t let him leave. I would help him get over this.”

“You think he can change?” I asked. I felt like I was elsewhere.

“It would be selfish not to. *Hah*. Americans,” Mom said. “They don’t care when their family splits apart.”

“Are you going to tell Mom?” you asked the next day while I was driving us home from school. It must’ve been a Friday, since that was the only day neither of us had after school activities and could share a car home.

“Tell Mom what,” I said.

“Don’t be stupid.”

I thought about your visions of stage lights and ovations in the dead of night, when no music could hide your thoughts. You stiffened before I even said another word. Mom and Dad had been increasingly vocal about their disapproval of band practice.

“You gonna tell Mom about your *dreams*?” I said. I didn’t mean to make the last word sound sarcastic, but that was the only way the word would’ve made it out of my mouth.

“Shut up.”

Your words came out bitter. We were quiet for a few moments. Then, because I had to know:

“So you’re okay with it?”

Your head turned towards me, but I didn’t dare look at your face.

“How can I not be?”

There was an edge of genuine confusion in your voice. I realized that, by listening to all my thoughts over these years, you perhaps understood as well as I did. You had the raw data, not my manipulated sentences. How could you not understand?

You knew, and yet I still didn’t want you to hear. As I said, daydreams of the future are fragile. When I say daydreams of the future, I mean daydreams of what you desire. Perhaps that was why you always had your headphones plugged in, or a guitar in hand. Likewise, I sought the music.

In the colder months of fall, Blair and I began meeting up at her house on Friday evenings, when both of her parents were out of the house. I would stay there until the sky darkened, and the light through the open window saturated our skin in blue. I told Mom and Dad that I was attending study sessions.

Lying on the floor of her room, the carpet rubbing warm friction against our skin, we listened through the CD collection Blair had inherited from her father, all the while staring up at

her textured ceiling. Something about the grainy darkness unlocked the last few barricades between us. Whenever Blair's hand drifted toward the stereo remote, easing the volume lower, I knew she was going to tell me a secret.

“There used to be blood on that wall, but my mom painted over it.”

“Sometimes, I daydream about killing him.”

“If I have kids, I don't want them to be soft. But I also don't want to hit them.”

I was struck by her last line, because I knew what she meant. Sometimes, you want to hit someone so they understand how you feel.

Then there were the things she said silently. Like when, in the middle of another Mountain Goats song, she propped herself up onto an elbow and leaned over me, her hair a curtain blocking the evening blue air sinking through her open window. Slowly, slower than the music, she leaned down. Then, when we were merely an inch or two apart, I closed my eyes and closed the distance.

In the dark, I gave secrets too. Like Blair did, I let my hand creep toward the remote, and I turned on my side, hovering above her, feeling the pull of gravity.

“I think my parents need each other, but don't want each other,” I said.

“Little things like garage doors control my life,” I said.

“Sometimes, when my dad hits me and it doesn't leave a bruise, I'm upset that I don't have proof,” I said.

There was a night when I was telling her about Mom and Dad. “He never hits her,” I said. “Sometimes, I forget this, but he really has never hit her. He’ll push her a little bit, but nothing else.”

Blair leaned her chin on her arms.

“I think it’s because he knows that if he does anything more than push, she’ll leave. And he can’t let her leave. He needs her to stay, or else he won’t have anyone.”

I paused. I then told her about a time when I was little, and Dad accidentally cut his palm on a glass he’d thrown himself. Mom had already stormed out of the garage. You were watching silently from the kitchen table. Dad just clutched at his hand, looking lost. I couldn’t stand the look. I went into the bathroom, got out a wash rag, then offered it to Dad. We said nothing during the exchange.

For a moment after, there was just the music. I could tell Blair was waiting, listening.

“He hurts us, but not Mom,” I said. “He doesn’t try to control his anger. Is it because he knows we won’t leave?”

“You won’t leave?” Blair asked.

“I have no one else.”

Blair stared at me with hooded eyes. The gravity pulled stronger. Right as I leaned forward, the music stopped. The CD had reached its end. I halted. Your voice flooded my mind.

I don’t understand.

I hate him.

Come home. Come home. Come home.

I could imagine you then, sitting at the dining table beneath the orange light, the clock ticking relentlessly, and Dad staring down at you, the symbols in the math textbook growing

more complex by the minute. But I was elsewhere. I was lying in the dark with a girl and her secrets, our skin the color of bruises from the evening light, the distance between us small enough that her exhales became my inhales. This moment was mine.

In my mind, I started imagining the first few measures of Liszt's Liebestraum No. 3, the song I had been practicing with Mike. I pictured my bow gliding across the strings, my fingers moving across the fingerboard with ease. Slowly, your voice dwindled, becoming a low whisper. I leaned forward towards Blair and pressed our lips together.

In my post-graduate years, I would learn that by simply imagining music, the auditory cortex can be stimulated. To demonstrate the power of musical imagery, researchers made subjects listen to songs cut with brief snippets of silence. Nearly all the subjects reported hearing the entirety of the song.

In the brain of musicians, musical imagery is particularly powerful. By simply listening to a song, or watching another play an instrument, a musician's motor cortex will light up, following the patterns as though they themselves were creating the music. I have always been particularly fond of these studies. Though most researchers I've met despise a poetic extrapolation, I like how these studies suggest that, even without an instrument in your hand, or an iPod, a radio, or turntable, the music is still with you.

When I got home, I saw the scattering of scratch paper on the dining room table, the textbook left open. The lights were all off, save for a lamp in the living room. Mom and Dad's

bedroom door was shut. I could not hear you, but I could hear, from the basement, the strummings of a guitar. I crept quietly into my room. I touched my lips. For hours, you practiced. For hours, I could not hear you.

*

The last thing I remember about that year was the night you almost left. The ongoing argument about wasting your time at band practice had come to a head. There was yelling, but no one had thrown any punches yet. The argument had begun in the dining room, then escalated into the living room. Mom was washing dishes. I was sitting at the kitchen table, frozen.

There was always a rhythm and flow to the arguments. First there was brittle, terse tension, broken when someone first raised their voice, usually Dad. Once the second person began yelling, the momentum truly picked up. It was like a play, or an opera. Crescendo, decrescendo. Dispersed through the argument were brief pockets of peace, chances for one to breathe. Then, strength regained, the yelling would start again. Glasses might be thrown, furniture kicked—damage to be regretted later, the next day. Then, like the punch line to the third act, physical contact breaks the rhythm.

Dad shoved you against the wall that night, but instead of holding still, you straightened and stood back up. I realized you were nearly as tall as Dad now, your frame filled out by the light, corded muscle that all boys seem to naturally grow. Dad in the light looked faded. He took a step back.

Like a child, you thought.

For a breathless second, I thought you were going to hit back. If you did, something would change permanently. We would all have to relearn our roles, relearn our lives.

But instead, you simply straightened your shirt and grabbed your car keys. I heard your footsteps stomp out the garage. With only the three of us left in the house, Dad gave a long, burdened exhale and walked away toward his bedroom. Mom continued washing dishes.

For a while, I could not hear your thoughts. Perhaps you had the car radio on. Winter had already arrived, and the sky darkened early these days. Around an hour later, Mom decided to look for you.

“Where do you think he would go?” Mom asked me, car keys in hand. There was a pinched look of desperation on her face. Dad was still in his bedroom.

“How would I know,” I said.

“You’re his sister.”

“You’re his mother.”

The pinched look tightened. I closed my eyes.

Like a whine, like it’s talking, begging... a scissor into the belly... tail still twitching...

I envisioned the stars above, your breath like faint smoke in the winter air. The night, as heavy as tar. The woods, shrouded in hazy, granular darkness, as though, if you approached it, you might just dissolve into nighttime dust.

“The river,” I said. “Maybe he’s at the river.”

Half an hour later, you returned. I met your eyes as you entered through the garage door. Your gaze was cold. *Traitor*; you thought. Mom was only a few steps behind. She told you to take a warm shower. Dad did not come out the rest of that night. I don’t think he ever apologized.

That night was the last time he ever hit either of us.

III.

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

In college, I studied neuroscience. Mom and Dad wanted me to study something more fundamental, like biology or chemistry, but I became mystified by the brain after a lecture on mind reading. I learned that our thoughts are reflexive, firing endlessly, with only a few sent to the mouth to be spoken. I learned about scientists who tried to bypass the mouth, employing machinery that tracked blood flow in the brain. They wanted to see the brain unrestrained. To know what was being thought, but not spoken.

A cold seemed to settle over us once I left for college. I call it a cold because it wasn't as alive as tension, nor as premeditated as hatred. In your mind, I was *she* and *her* again, and there were days when you didn't leave the music. On those days, I considered apologizing, though I didn't know what I'd be apologizing for. Everything, maybe, but also nothing. My instinct to apologize always felt ridiculous when, a few hours later, your voice returned, and everything felt normal again. *Soon*, I often caught you thinking. *Soon what?* No answer.

I spent summers at home, mostly occupying my time by working at Jingo's. You were gone nearly every day of the week, either practicing with your band or gigging at some town nearby. Mom and Dad still pestered you about practice, but Dad wasn't getting angry anymore. Instead, he was more concerned about his mother, whose dementia had recently taken a sharp plunge. Neither of us had ever met his mother, Ah ma. I felt sorrowful, but only in a removed, distant way. The way one feels sorry for someone on the news. Deeply, but fleetingly.

Over break my first summer back, you told me that Blair asked if I was in town. You told her that I wouldn't be for another few weeks and gave no definite date.

"Thanks," I said, despite the disappointed look on your face. I didn't want to face Blair. Time had dulled my memories of her, which made a clean separation at that moment easier. I still remembered Mom's words in the car. It was either stay and change or leave and be free. One choice ensured that I would not be alone.

She is just like them, you thought. *She is stuck*. Then—

"You are just like them," you said, your words sharp, real. Perhaps what hurt so much about your words was the knowledge that you had selected them. Not only had you thought them, but you uttered them outloud, having considered the words truthful enough to be worth the hurt.

Your words stuck with me all summer and throughout the school year. I felt wounded. I didn't want to be *she, her, them*. Like a child, I set out to prove you wrong.

It began in small, secret ways. Mom always preferred that I call home once a day, a task I usually completed on the walk back home to my shared apartment. In the spring of my sophomore year of college, I began calling her once every other day, claiming a heavy workload, then two times a week, stating that I had taken up a few more extracurriculars. I knew this was news Mom wanted to hear, since I was lacking in the volunteering hours I would need for medical school. In truth, however, I had dropped a few volunteering positions for an entry job at a primate lab, where I fed rhesus macaques that were addicted to cocaine. I was not so interested in feeding the monkeys as I was at getting a chance to peer at the PET scans of their brains,

glowing luminously against a dark screen. Each monitor held a different cross section of the brain. It all felt like an unraveled secret, waiting to be interpreted. A tab on medical school applications sat in my computer, but so did a list of neurology labs across the country. There was one lab name which I had highlighted and set in bold: The Rong Lab, which specialized in research on musical therapy in neurodegenerative diseases.

What I should have anticipated, but failed to nonetheless, was the loneliness that hit mid-March, as the flowers on campus swelled densely once again. Around that time, during one of Mom's biweekly phone calls, Mom informed me that you had decided to take a gap year after high school to gig with the band. She thought this was a fatal decision, though you left no room for argument. You threatened that you'd move out with Fulton if Mom kept hassling you, a threat which most American mothers would have loved to hear, but which Mom did not. She asked me to call you, to persuade you into looking at colleges instead, but I was more transfixed by your threat to move out. Perhaps that was always the difference between you and me. You had people to run away to. People who have been your friends your whole life. I did not. My life only had passerbys, which was a fault of my own.

There are many lonely people in this world, though. You can tell by the way their eyes search a room, looking for someone equally stranded. When they identify one another, they gravitate toward each other like moths toward a light, though there is no light, only moths.

I knew he was lonely the second time we met. I knew *because* we had met a second time. We were both Juniors that year, though he was a year older than I was, a fact he seemed to find some private delight in. His name was Rubén, and he was an English major. We met in an American history class, both of us seeking to fulfill the last of our general education requirements. During lecture, he liked to sit at the front of the auditorium. I sat in the back. But

on test day, when seating arrangements were made alphabetically, we sat next to each other in the center row.

Toward the end of February, we finished a midterm at the same time and exited the lecture hall simultaneously. He held the door open for me.

“What did you think?” he asked. It was a safe question, the kind that can easily continue into a conversation or not.

“It was fine,” I said. “Straightforward.”

He nodded. “I’m Rubén.” He held out his hand. I shook it. His hand was warm and large. Secure. We headed opposite ways at the end of the hall.

For each class after that, he began sitting next to me in the back. Conversations were short. Polite exchanges of *Hello* and *How’d you do on the test?* Walking back to our dorm rooms in the winter cold, he told me, “You’re very quiet.”

I almost told him about my silence throughout elementary school, but held back. To explain everything then would be exhausting.

“What’s wrong with quiet?” I asked instead.

“Nothing. I just don’t know what to say.”

That was the thing about other people. They always had so much to say. Why didn’t they just listen?

I thought the silence would be reason enough to leave in the end. Nobody likes a one way conversation. But loneliness makes you desperate. Instead of pretending we never met, Rubén kept sitting next to me in class. When we crossed paths on campus, we fell in step with one other. He liked to long board, and would hop off in favor of walking. In a brute force challenge against the silence, we played twenty questions. He asked me about the macaques. I asked him about his

writing. Once, after he found out I took French in high school, his eyes lit up and he began speaking to me in flawless French.

“Parlez-vous Français? C’est bien! Le Français me manque.”

“Oh,” I said lamely. “I don’t really remember any of it. Our French program wasn’t great either. Our teacher spoke with an American accent.”

Rubén’s expression fell a little.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“Nothing. I just asked if you spoke French.”

On weekends, we took walks in the hiking trails near the school. He asked the kind of bold, inconsequential questions that all young people asked:

“Do you believe in a god?”

“When did you stop believing?”

“What do you think happens after we die?”

I told him that we were lightly Buddhist, though we had strong roots in Buddhism; Ah ma had been a nun, and Mom’s side all converted to Buddhists after Mom’s grandmother, a devout Christian, lost her family in some war. At home, though, all we had was a pu sa, which Mom set offerings out to on holidays and made us pray to on Christmas and both the New Years. What I didn’t tell him was that I never really thought of Buddha as a god, since Mom never taught us anything about Buddhism. Instead, I obtained a vague belief in a white, bearded Christian god through watching *The Simpsons* on motel TVs. Because of this influence, I used to imagine an afterlife in heaven. Then I became depressed by the fact that everyone there would be old, and that Mom and Dad might prefer to hang out with their parents and sisters rather than with us. And heaven in general would be overcrowded and monotonous. I personally thought it

was paradoxical that one could be among their loved ones and also be always happy. After much influence from the sciences, I decided I liked the idea of nothing after death. I liked the certainty a real end. No more of anything. Just nothing, finally.

You know this, of course, just like how you know all of this. You know because you listened.

Rubén himself was Christian and had been an altar boy for a number of years during his youth. He went to bible studies every week and church every Sunday. I stiffened slightly at this, though I knew nothing concrete about Christianity. Perhaps I felt unbalanced by his belonging to such a long and established tradition, of which I had no equivalent of. Whereas the people we knew in Colby were at times controlled by tradition, we took from our past and our surroundings what we wanted. When Mom and Dad first moved to Colby and liked the Christmas trees glowing behind strangers' windows, they took Christmas.

I relaxed once again when Rubén cut off my thoughts by stating that he had lost his faith as a teenager. He remained vague on the cause. Nonetheless, he still believed there was a heaven, or at least an afterlife. Mostly he stayed religious for the community aspect, he said. Religion kept him in touch with his mother.

I knew Rubén was in love with me by the end of the semester, though we had known each other for less than four months. I knew because he wrapped an arm around my shoulders when I mentioned I was cold on our walk to class. I knew because he always looked me right in the eyes for too long, smiling and saying nothing. I knew because he told me secrets.

One of my brothers just got out of jail, he said. I've been working overtime to send him money.

I don't care about these people, he said, waving back at a group of guys across campus. They don't know anything about me.

I miss home, he said. I really, really miss home.

Before the hurricane, home was Puerto Rico. After, home was Arizona.

“There’s too much sand there,” he told me on a Friday evening, as we lounged on his bed playing video games in the dark. “Too much sand and not enough water.”

I remembered, then, the spread of the Petrified forest you once showed me, the glossiness of the paper somehow dulling the image, making it appear flat and ordinary. *Soon*, you thought suddenly. Your thoughts had been quiet that night, save for that singular *Soon*.

“Do you think you’re gonna move back one day?” I asked. He shook his head, then jammed a button on his controller hard, killing a criminal on screen.

“One of my older brothers has a house in Arizona,” he said, “just an hour away from my mom’s. He says it’s mine as soon as I graduate. It’s nothing fancy. Sort of rural. It’ll just be me, but I’m thinking of getting a dog. I had a dog growing up.”

His knee was pressing innocuously against my thigh. Though I was fairly certain he was infatuated with me, I still had trouble discerning whether some of his touches were come ons or incidental. When I first entered elementary school, I learned that there were people in this world who gave away touch freely, as though touch was neither intimate nor harmful, but instead just something that happened. I hoped to myself that the touch was just that—a touch. I wanted Rubén to be more than another one of those lonely boys who desperately wanted to fall in love. I saw them all over campus. Those boys who looked at you as if you held a future. I wanted us to

transcend that, and so I had given him the benefit of the doubt, hoping not out of logic, but out of need that he would consider friendship as vital as romance. The need was so strong that, as we sat side by side on his bed, his knee pressing innocuously against my thigh, I didn't dare move an inch closer nor an inch away.

“And what about you?” he asked. “Where do you think you'll wind up?”

Rubén was looking at me now, looking at me head on the way boys do when they're trying to make you feel something. I wanted his gaze to work. I searched his face, looking for a dimple or a mole I could latch onto. Something small I could find charming, irresistible. But there was nothing.

“You mean ideally, or realistically?” I asked. “Cause there's a difference.”

He laughed, but it slipped neither of us that I offered a non-answer.

“Come on,” he said. “You've got to have an idea.”

I thought of my childhood dream of living in Venice, Italy. I was still a bit marveled by the concept of a landless world, but I knew now that the city mostly ran on cars—what else were the bridges for?—and that the canal water was probably dirty. I didn't want to say any of this, thinking he'd make fun of me, but his eyes were looking at me so openly that I felt I owed him some truth.

“I used to like the idea of Venice. Venice, Italy, I mean. I like how the water cuts into the city. Reminds you that there's a whole big ocean out there.”

Rubén looked at me closely, his face betraying no thought.

“You would like Puerto Rico then,” he said.

Once you give away one secret, the others come easier.

The next Friday, we were playing video games again. We tried movies once, but Rubén didn't like how we couldn't talk. We played a boardgame once too, but each time I looked up, he was gazing back at me, studying me. Video games were the unspoken middle ground, since they let us talk and not look at each other.

The thing about lonely people is that they haven't had the chance to talk in a long time. Rubén talked like he had never spoken. Sometimes, I caught a pause before his next sentence, as if the brief silence had made him suddenly self-conscious. When he paused that Friday, he turned to me to fill that silence.

"Tell me something," he said. The lights were all off, but the room blinked with the sterile, sharp colors from the TV.

"Tell you what," I said, though I knew what he meant. He wanted secrets.

"I don't know." He definitely knew. Everybody wants childhood stories. Sensing the unease, however, he opted for something safer. "Tell me why you want to be a doctor."

Rubén himself wanted to be a writer. He told me this the first week we met. He wanted to be a writer because he liked how stories could last. "Can you imagine," he asked, "dying and having every single thought you've ever had, every single memory, just gone with you?"

When writers want a secret, they don't just want the facts that you remember. They want the moment you existed. Every texture, every taste.

"Well, my parents wanted me to be a doctor," I said. I watched his face shift. He's heard this story before. Not from me, and maybe not even from anybody in particular, but he's heard it. That upset me. I didn't want to be made small. "Not even because they want me to help people or anything, but cause of the financial stability and all that."

“Yeah, I know,” he said. I blushed. I realized he probably understood this better than me, what with growing up with a single mother and having to suddenly move to the States. I felt a surge of competitiveness in me suddenly. An ugly need to prove that I had it bad.

“My dad was an ass about it, though,” I said. I wanted to say more, but I stopped. Rubén looked at me, hungry for a story.

Speak, you instructed, your voice flooding into my head. I wondered where you were and for how long you had been listening. I found myself getting irritated.

You don't understand, I thought.

But I do.

Rubén looked away when he realized I wouldn't say anymore. His hands reclaimed his game controller.

“Well, sorry about that,” he said.

“Yeah, sorry,” I echoed.

*

The summer after junior year was when Dad got lost for the first time. He had left for the university to drop off some borrowed books, but never returned. Mom got nervous after an hour, then called police when Dad failed to answer his phone. You were at band practice then, and I was working at Jingo's. I didn't know until I got home that anything had happened. Dad looked fine, albeit a bit dazed as he sat on the couch sipping from a water bottle. Mom was frantic.

“What do you mean you were just confused? We've lived here for nearly twenty years! How can you get lost?”

“My blood pressure’s probably acting up,” Dad said, as if that explained anything. “I just got a little dizzy. Stop worrying about it.”

“But, but—” Mom’s voice dropped low to a whisper “—what about your mother?”

By then, Ah ma had passed. In the months and weeks before, our phone would ring in the dead of night because Ah ma was lonely and unaware of the time. At first, either Mom and Dad would get up to answer the phone, providing Ah ma soft assurances until she promised to hang up. Then there were nights when the phone rang repeatedly until Mom got up and unplugged it.

“Dementia can be heritable,” I added from the doorway, feeling useless. “It’s usually not, but it can be.”

“Did you hear what she said? It can be heritable,” Mom said. Dad grunted. “This isn’t a joke. You need to see a doctor. Do you hear me?”

I thought Dad would say no. Then, perhaps as a true sign of how much he would come to change, Dad nodded in silent agreement. Mom looked taken aback by his compliance.

By the end of the summer, Dad had an official diagnosis: Early onset Alzheimer’s disease. The doctor said Dad could live anywhere from three to ten years, depending on the severity. Some people even lived up to twenty. I did the math in my head: Dad was fifty-eight then. Fifty-eight plus twenty was seventy-eight. I would be forty by the time Dad was seventy-eight. There was still a lot of time, I told myself. Still a lot of time. Unless Dad died in three years. I wasn’t prepared to lose someone in three years, not when I had never lost anyone in my life. How would Mom handle the finances? Who would I go to when I needed to make a big decision?

Toward the end of the appointment, the doctor told us that Early Onset Alzheimer's was genetic. Both you and I had a fifty percent chance of inheriting the gene, in which case our chances of getting the disease were close to a hundred.

"There's a test you can get," the doctor said, looking back and forth between us. "However, it's voluntary, as many people don't want to know."

In the aftermath, we all gathered in the living room, silent. You looked lost, but your thoughts were all angry.

I'll be happier not knowing

But if I know, then I'll value every moment

If I know, then I'll know whether to have kids

I'll be happier not knowing

It's his fault

It's his fault

It's his fault—

"Let's get some rest," Mom said. "We've had a long day."

That summer, you decided you didn't want to go to college.

"Then what are you planning to do?" Mom asked desperately. The three of you were in the living room, the windows shut since it was late evening. I was in my room, but I could hear every word.

"I'm going to gig," you said. "Blair, Booker, and Fulton are all in."

"Gig?" Mom said, the word unfamiliar on her tongue. "Does that earn money?"

“Yes,” you snapped.

“Enough to buy a house? To buy food?” Mom shook her head. “This isn’t a career. What about health insurance?”

“It’ll be worth it,” you said. Your voice was steely with conviction. In your mind, you thought *I don’t know how I’m going to do it.*

“You haven’t grown up yet,” Mom said. “Do you know how challenging this is? Do you think anyone can become famous? You think the world will want to watch some Chinese boy on TV? The other parents—they’ll laugh when they see you.”

Your thoughts burned with humiliation.

“I don’t care about being famous, that’s not what I care about.” You paused. “I just want to play music.”

“Music can be a hobby,” Mom said pleadingly. There was a moment of silence, and I remembered that Dad was out there too, simply listening. He hadn’t said anything, but he didn’t need to. I could imagine Mom’s eyes constantly darting toward him, as if to say *What about us? Why aren’t you thinking about us?*

“This is my choice,” you stated. The words. The conviction. It was as if you knew they couldn’t stop you. *Wouldn’t stop you.* If they stopped you, you would leave, and we would become one of those fractured families that Mom had no respect for.

Sure enough, Mom said nothing in response, and then your footsteps marched downstairs. A few minutes later, the sound of guitar strings floated through the air.

I did the math over and over again. In three years, I would be twenty-four. Dad would be sixty-one. Anxiety suddenly gripped me.

It was my senior year of college, and I had originally planned to tell Mom and Dad over the summer that I would no longer be applying for medical school. Then everything with Dad happened. I remember that Dad once told me how happy he was that you were born before his father passed. As the only son in the family, Dad had ensured that his father's last name would continue. I thought about that now. Dad was never that interested in passing on his own last name, but he was interested in passing on the sum of his hard work. Our family was not built upon generations and generations. There was no fall back. If Dad died in three years, I wanted him to know beforehand that everything he had worked for wouldn't disappear.

At school, I quit my primate feeding job. I took up more volunteering clubs. I began filling out my application essays. I made a list of schools I planned to apply to. Mom and Dad were proud. You were disappointed. You told me you couldn't believe I would just do what they wanted. You didn't seem to understand that, between the two of us, there was only one ticket to leave, and you had taken it.

Looking back, that last year of school went by like a trance. I completed task after task, moving forward to a definite end goal. Mom could tell that I was tired when we video called, the two of us back on our every other day schedule. "Just think—when you look back at all this someday, you'll remember it fondly," she said in April, when I called her during midterms. These words sparked a prickle of warmth beneath my eyes, the telltale sign that I would cry. I put on a smile until the call ended, but let a few tears leak later that evening with Rubén, for I was unable to hold back in the presence of someone who was more than willing to be sympathetic. He pushed away the essay he'd been working on then held me against his chest, which was solid and

warm. I liked it. It felt like a brother's hug. Hooking his chin over my head, he asked me what was wrong. I told him about Dad, which caused his forehead to wrinkle in sorrow, but also his eyes to focus with rapt attention. I didn't tell him that it was Mom's words that had set me off, making me realize that I didn't just want to be happy when I looked back, but that I wanted to be happy in the moment. The truth was not what Rubén wanted. Such trite details do not make a good story.

* * *

After college, I had one gap year which I intended to spend on completing my applications and going to interviews. I dreaded that year. I knew you would be gone all the time on gigs, leaving me with Mom and Dad and the awkwardness that seemed to have filled the house since Dad's diagnosis. What should've been my only solace was Rubén, who insisted we video chat once a week. I dreaded his calls. I feared we would run out of things to say.

Then you came up with a proposition late May: "Come on tour with me. We're going to California."

"Tour?" I echoed. The word brought to mind celebrities and things that were very far away from us.

"Yes, tour," you said. "We're promoting our LP."

I asked you what an LP was.

“It’s an album, dumbass.”

You said you had everything planned out. You employed a manager, who was really just a friend of a friend, and you got a van rental for cheap because Fulton’s dad knew a guy. You had the gigs all lined up and posted online. The gigs ranged from openers to double headers to acoustic radio sessions at no-name stations in the southwest. All you needed now was an extra hand to sell merch and perhaps drive now and then. It all sounded much less glamorous than I initially imagined.

“So? What do you say? I’ll pay you.”

“I don’t need your money.”

“Come on,” you said. “It’ll be fun. We’ll do some sight seeing. We’ll even get to see the ocean once we’re in California. Booker and I have this boat rental planned out. We can drive out into the ocean, bring some drinks—”

Your thoughts: *I don’t know if I can do this. I thought I could let go, but I can’t. Not yet.*

If I went, I would have less time to work on my applications. If I went, I would have to see Blair again. If I went, that was more time spent away from Dad.

You promised.

I suddenly remembered sitting next to you in the backseat of our family van, corn husks blurring by outside the windows. That precious time after the pool but before the music, when your presence in my life didn’t feel so fragile, or like a bargaining chip.

“Fine,” I said, interrupting. A small smile twitched across your lips. “But seriously. Don’t pay me.”

In sixteen days, we would reach the ocean.

The morning we left, our new rental van parked in the driveway, your eyes were red. You and Mom had another fight the day before over your decision to not go to college. The argument had lasted well into the night. Both me and Dad had already gone to bed, but I did not fall asleep until the both of you had finished shouting. From the sounds of it, the fight never resolved. It simply fizzled out once you both became fatigued. Neither of you spoke to each other in the morning, though Dad did offer a brief *drive safely* as you headed out the door. Mom eventually came out to stand on the garage steps, tea in hand, to watch us load the instruments and amps into the trunk. She said nothing. When everything was in the van, Mom made a *come here* gesture and you both gave each other a stiff hug. Then, when it was my turn, Mom leaned in close to my ear and told me to keep an eye on you. “Talk some sense into him,” she said. “Call us every night. Don’t stay out too late—and once you get to California, don’t swim in the ocean.”

I nodded. We set off.

There were six of us total: You, me, Blair, Booker, Fulton, and Alexander, an extra guitarist you hired for the tour. You sat in the driver’s seat. I sat in the passenger’s. We picked everybody up one by one, with Blair being last. I was relieved by this fact. By the time she was onboard, her Wurlitzer roped into the trunk, there was only one seat remaining beside Booker in the middle. “Hey guys,” she said, then glanced at me. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said. Both of our tones were overly casual, conveying the fact that we had both rehearsed our responses ahead of time. No one seemed to notice.

With everyone onboard, we began the two hour drive to KC, where the first gig was scheduled. The route was familiar, all six of us having gone to KC for holidays all throughout our childhoods. We knew when to look up from our phones to see the statue of Mother Goose, or the peaks of rollercoaster spearing through the treetops.

It was a quarter after twelve when we arrived at a small KC pub called THE SATURN LOUNGE, hidden in the depths of the Power & Light district. There was another van already pulled up at the side entrance, the back doors open. Two gangly men unloaded lights. One of them turned around and waved.

“You know them?” I asked. They looked a few years older than us.

“That’s From Last Week,” you said “We’re their opener.”

The show did not start until seven, leaving several hours for set up and sound check. I felt out of place as everyone started unloading their instruments and heading inside. My only responsibilities were two cardboard boxes of shirts, which were unnecessary until the show started.

From Last Week rehearsed first. They were a six piece band, all guys in loose jeans, their legs peeking out like sticks through the ripped holes. The lead singer was barefoot and playing with an unlit cigarette as the rest of the instruments tuned. When the first chord struck, it was mesmerizing. I had never gone out of my way to hear live music, and I was taken aback by the presence of it all. The rest of you looked unphased, sitting with your backs against the wall, heads down at your phones. When the instruments were finished tuning, the players all dispersed into their private pockets of the stage. The lead singer glanced back. He counted down from three.

Throughout high school, you would lecture me on what a band's sound meant. "It's how their music feels, sort of like an aesthetic, but even more internal." I considered your definition vague at best and didn't truly understand what you meant until From Last Week rehearsed their first song. The notes from the piano were bright. Elaborate. Then the guitar joined in, and the voice, the percussion. The singer's voice was muscular and durable, heightening the theatrical tones of the piano. I realized that a band's sound was their identity. Their attitude. It was what they wanted you to see and feel when they played. From Last Week sounded organized and structured, but also grand, like a three act play, or an opera. I watched as the guitarists found their way next to each other, angling their guitars parallel, as if to let the instruments converse. The lead singer meandered back and forth on stage, limbs jiggling as if shaking off a nicotine fit.

When their set list was finished, From Last Week clambered off stage. You stood up first, then the rest of the band. I felt a sudden sense of pride. All of you set up your instruments on stage with the nonchalance and precision that came with muscle memory. I watched from the floor as you tossed the microphone back and forth in your hands, waiting for the rest of the band to tune. You carefully avoided my eyes, as if shy. When tuning was completed, you glanced back at your band the way the lead from From Last Week did, then counted down from three.

If From Last Week sounded operatic, then your sound was smaller. More intimate, not demanding attention through big, heavy chords, but rather through crisp, delicate piano notes that persuaded the audience to be quiet so they could hear. The chords were soon backed by percussion and guitar, and your voice finally joined, familiar, modest, and strong. The melody was sweet, occasionally curving into a bout of melancholy, or trespassing into thunderous anger. It was rock, but with a lullabic core. As you sang, you gazed out into the crowd, as already

seeing an audience. So absorbed by your presence and the sound of your voice, I hardly paid attention to what you were saying:

Remember that day we nearly lost Mom

Sunflowers everywhere

Coins on the sidewalk

That was from a time

When we had bruises on our arms

When we were afraid to speak

And had no one.

You were singing to me. You were singing to me and you weren't even looking my way. My heart beat faster. My hands grew cold. Endless questions spouted off in my head: *What else have you been saying that I haven't heard? Who else has heard these lyrics?* And, when I had calmed down a little—but *there were no sunflowers. Only corn. Endless fields of corn, the sound of dry husks everywhere.*

But the music was still playing, and you couldn't hear my voice. I remembered the look of shyness that crossed your face as you stepped on stage. Was it because you knew I'd hear and understand? Was that why you brought me along? To admit some sort of plagiarism to me?

When rehearsal finished, you all gave a small cheer. Your eyes darted over to me.

This is what she has to see, you thought.

We had three hours until the show started, so we drove to buy an early dinner at a Winstead's. Outside the diner, the Kansas City sky was already turning a muted blue. You all looked happy, crammed together into a small booth. Each time you met my eyes, I thought: *there were no sunflowers*.

You did not respond at first, your thoughts a flurry of nerves concerning that night's show. I eventually felt guilty enough to try to focus my thoughts on something else. Blair, perhaps, who kept glancing my way. It wasn't until we were leaving the diner that you fell in step with me and replied, "It's a song. Sunflowers sounded better. But that's not *the point*."

That night, when the sky was fully dark, we returned to the bar again. I sat again next to the stage, my cardboard boxes of shirts beside me. You all played the full opening set list this time, the bar now filled. I realized showtime was a dramatically different atmosphere.

There was a heat on stage now. Warm and hazy, like the height of a fever, palpable even from where I stood. It sticks to you, and everything around you becomes unreal. When I looked over at Fulton, his eyes were closed, his mouth open as though in the middle of a word. Beside him, Blair's hands jolted over the Wurlitzer as though each touch of the keys sent a spike of electricity through her. Her hair fell over her face, obstructing her eyes.

From the side of the stage, I could only see your back. Your shirt was soaked through with sweat, your hair ruffled from running your fingers through it again and again. You marched back and forth on stage, sometimes grabbing the mic stand as though it were a dance partner. I thought that, even if I could hear your thoughts then, I would hear nothing.

The source of this shift in atmosphere appeared to be the crowd, which felt larger than you would later tell me it was. Most of them were college kids, a few older. Some swayed in place. A few sat down. But they all had their eyes on stage, bodies leaning forward, as though

drawn magnetically. Most wore From Last Week shirts and appeared unfamiliar with your music, but a few in the front row moved their lips silently, mouthing your words.

How peculiar it was, to hear your life play out in the open air, to see it flutter across strangers' lips.

*

In order to save money, we crammed all six people into one motel room each night. As the only girls, Blair and I shared a bed. Everyone else rotated between the remaining queen bed, the couch, and a sleeping bag.

Since Blair stepped into the van, Blair and I had not had a moment alone. At night, we both lied in bed stiff, afraid to move. During the day, I could feel her stare on me when she thought I wasn't looking. I wondered what changes she saw. I myself had noticed that her hair was longer, nearly to her elbows, and that her face had sharpened, baby fat giving way to bone structure. The clothes she wore were a bit different. The only way that I can describe the difference is that she looked like a person of the world now.

After KC, we left for Tulsa. At a rest stop just past Springfield, Blair stepped up next to me in front of the vending machines. It was just the two of us, everyone else still in the bathrooms. I could see our reflections in the vending machine glass. We looked like strangers.

"I came out to my parents," she said. We both studied the rows of candy bars. "I just thought you should know."

Alone, it was as if our conversation had picked up where we last left it.

"How did they take it?" I asked. Blair clasped her left palm over her elbow.

“Not great,” she said. She looked over at the highway behind the chain link fence. “I moved out. Into the apartments near the university.”

I apologized. I thought apologizing was the appropriate next step.

“No, don’t be,” she said. “I’m happier now.”

There was a scuffle behind us as you and the rest of the guys emerged from the bathroom. Blair looked at me.

“What about you?” she asked. I felt the urge to lie, but held back.

“Not yet,” I said. Casually. As if coming out was on my agenda, and I was simply too busy with other things in my life. Blair offered a wan smile. She knew my lie.

After the rest stop, I was in charge of driving us until Tulsa. You sat in the back with Fulton, Blair, and Alexander, arguing about each others’ playlists, while Booker read quietly beside me. Mile markers passed by. Beyond the windshield, the jagged land of Ozark territory gradually smoothed out into flat, red earth. The trees became dark, as if charred. Above, the clouds grew large and luminous, hanging low in a herd across the sky.

Fulton ended up being in charge of the playlist. He leaned over, plugging his phone into the aux, then played some song that elicited a few cheers, as well as one groan. Fulton began drumming on his arm rests.

“You have to hear this part coming up,” he said, leaning over Booker’s shoulder to dial up the volume. “Oh my god, the drum part is amazing.”

When the drum part came, everyone listened. Even Booker looked up from his book. It was as if everyone had fell into a trance. When it ended, Fulton clapped. The rest of you looked in awe.

“Fucking hell, I wish I could do that,” Fulton said.

The Tulsa show ran much like the KC show, only smaller this time, since we were the only act. During the second song, I received a text from Rubén. He had looked online and saw that we had a show in Phoenix.

I'll drive down, he wrote.

You really don't have to, I replied. There was a pause before he messaged me again.

I wanna. I want to talk to you.

I tucked the phone away in my pocket. I massaged my temple with my knuckles. On stage, you sang the words you did last night without an ounce of regret. I wanted to step out of the bar, breathe some fresh air. But there were my two cardboard boxes. I remained rooted in place.

After the show, you came running up, forehead slick with sweat.

“How did we do?” you asked. There was no more music now, and yet your thoughts felt dampened. Just a quiet—*this was amazing*.

“Good,” I said. “Great. You’re killing it.”

You smiled again. I wanted to match your energy. I couldn’t. As if sensing this, you turned around and hustled back to your band. You all traded high fives. I felt as I did in the car, when everyone fell quiet to hear the music. I was an outsider. I didn’t understand the music. I didn’t understand *the point*.

“Did it go well?” Mom asked. She had called shortly after we arrived at the motel. Everyone was inside the room waiting for the shower. I had wandered out to the balcony.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said. A pause. “How’s everything at home?”

Mom ran through her day. She told me how she and Dad went to the grocery store and bought ground pork for *sui jiao*. She didn’t mention anything particular about Dad, and so I assumed that meant nothing was wrong.

“What about you?” Mom asked. “Oklahoma City next, right?”

“Right,” I said. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she had our schedule printed in color on the fridge. “Oklahoma City, Amarillo then Albuquerque.” I had the entire map outlined on my phone, leaving no room to get lost. Mom *tsked*.

“Sounds exhausting,” she said. “Are you all drinking enough water? If the driving gets too tiring, you can pull over on the shoulder. That’s better than forcing yourself to continue.”

“I know, Mom,” I said. “I know.”

“I’m just making sure,” she said. A pause. Then, finally—“Is your brother there? Can you get him on the line?”

I turned around to the window that looked back into the room. You were sitting on the bed, laughing at something Fulton said. *Mom wants to talk*, I thought. You didn’t seem to hear. I walked over to the window and tapped the glass. You looked over. *Mom wants to talk*, I mouthed. You pointed vaguely at the TV. *Busy*, you replied.

“He’s busy,” I said.

“I told him to call me every night. He said he would.”

I looked back into the room. You were laughing again at something. It all looked like a scene. Something you might glimpse in a movie.

“Sorry, Mom,” I said. “Maybe tomorrow.”

You did not call the next day. Instead, you spent the whole day frowning into the microphone.

“What’s wrong,” Booker asked. You shook your head.

“Nothing. Just an off day.”

The Oklahoma City show passed, and we moved on. Exhausted by Oklahoma, everyone slept in the back of the van the next day as we headed onward toward Amarillo. I drove. You sat in the passenger seat, your phone open to a map. We had four hours to drive that day, all along I-40.

Whatever sort of transformation that had begun in Oklahoma took over full force once we crossed over to Texas. The land grew even flatter, and the short trees diminished into tiny scrubs that blemished the never ending stretch of red clay dirt. The tallest structure around were the windmills, looming like titans over the earth, spinning languidly in unison.

Beautiful, you thought. Later that night, in Amarillo, you played another show. From Last Week was there again, their lead singer puffing a cigarette anxiously outside the venue when we arrived. I soon noticed you had your own ritual too: a shot of whiskey timed precisely thirty minutes before the show. You had the alarm set on your phone.

When the show ended and morning came, we piled back in the van, ready to continue onward again. I felt fatigue in my bones, even only after a few days on the road. There was also the familiar tug of homesickness in my gut. How could you stand this, I wondered, watching as all of you loaded your instruments into the trunk with tired but excited grins. How could you

stand the constant moving, the uncertainty before every show? How could you stand not belonging to one place?

The closer we got to New Mexico, the redder the soil became, and the grass faded away, leaving only clumps of shrubbery. We stopped at the New Mexico welcome stop. The stop was designed with a still, sun dried fountain in the middle, light beige columns and beige brick surrounding it. Near the highway, there was a welcome sign that Blair wanted to take a picture in front of. I followed her, camera in hand. The highway wind whisked our hair.

We continued on. We crossed into Mountain Time at the border, that particular afternoon endless. The sky grew impossibly big, almost as if it was the sky itself that had shrunk the trees into shrubs and crushed the land flat. We passed a farm, the manure stench invading our van, and I saw more cows. Fields of them, crowded together into one white and black square. We passed billboards built of wood, practically falling apart into themselves, decaying into the land, ready to join the flatness. Some, not quite fallen apart, resembled skeletons.

What struck me most about the scenery was the road, wide and running into the sky at the horizon, free of the open cliffs that bordered the highways near Colby. The land was laid open. Beautiful. You thought to yourself that you could imagine living here. Here, this foreign and distant land.

An hour outside of Albuquerque, you interrupted the silence:

“What do you want to do with your life?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Excuse me?”

The rest of the van were asleep behind us. You glanced in the rearview mirror, then flexed your grip around the steering wheel.

“What I said. What do you want to do with your life?”

I opened my mouth and a laugh came out.

“Why are you asking me this?”

Because I still want us to be the same.

“I’m just curious,” you said defensively, unaware, perhaps, of even your own thoughts.

“Like, for example, I know what I want to do. I know what Fulton wants to do. I know what Booker wants to do.” Your eyes looked ahead. “But I feel like you don’t know what you want.”

I crossed my arms.

“You sound pretentious. Like those self-actualization speakers.”

“And you’re just derailing the conversation.”

I looked past the windshield. My mind drifted to cerebral cross sections against a dark screen, to the vibration of a violin string inches from my nose.

“You could have all that,” you said, interrupting the silence. A mesa rose outside our window, grand and silent. “As long as you’re willing to take the risks.”

“You don’t get it,” I said, thinking of Dad back home. I did the math again.

“But I do get it,” you said. “We’re the same.”

I opened my mouth. *But we aren’t* was the natural response. The only response that could further the argument. But I didn’t want it to be true. I closed my mouth. I was willing to lose if it meant we were still the same.

We arrived in Albuquerque later that evening. Instead of being positioned stage side, my cardboard boxes and I were set up toward the back, facing the stage. I felt the dense heat of the crowd. Phones raised up high in the air, offering dozens of small views of the stage. Sitting in the back, everything was different. For the first time, I was able to see you the way the audience saw you: wild, electric.

Watching you onstage, I was suddenly reminded of Vilde Frang, the first performer I'd ever seen live. She was a Norwegian classical violinist who passed through the university when I was in high school. I was there alone that night, trying to earn extra credit for my orchestra class. I sat in the left end of the fourth row, where I could see her fingers, long and dexterous, navigate along the throat of her instrument. The strings seemed to glimmer in the light. Michail Lifits accompanied her on piano, his back turned to me on the right side of the stage. As Frang played, her face contorted with emotion. Not the kind voluntarily put in place by the brain, but the kind that seems to be drawn out forcibly. As she played, my eyes kept drifting toward her face. *Look at me*, I thought. But she didn't look up. Her eyes, for the most part, were closed.

Then, in the middle of a Gabriel Faure sonata, the pianist ducked his head, his back curving, shoulders hunching into a solo. Frang lowered her violin for the break, and for the first time all evening, she looked out into the audience. Her eyes seemed to sweep past us all, gazing at some point further than the stage lights at the opposite end of the auditorium.

As you sung on stage, your body contorted by the music, you stared into that same space. Somewhere past the audience, past the stage lights. Past me sitting with my two cardboard boxes. Somewhere few people have gone, have dared to go. If it weren't for the music, I would know where you had gone. But without the music, you would be unable to go.

In the aftermath of Albuquerque, everyone was excited. The crowd had been large. People had sung along. You hoped that, as we neared LA, the shows would only get larger.

After Albuquerque, the next big city was Flagstaff, though, for once, we had a three day break between shows. Instead of driving to the city directly, we stopped for a night in Gallup just outside of Arizona.

We stayed at a motel a mere few yards away from the railroad. We had been driving alongside the trains for days, but they always appeared distant and untouchable. That evening, you decided you want to get up and close to the trains. Fulton agreed. Booker and Alexander got dragged along.

For the second time on the trip, I was left alone with Blair. We had the TV on in the motel room. It was an old model, the kind that fizzed with static electricity upon being turned on. As I sat curled up against the headboard of our bed, Blair did just that, standing in front of the TV with her fingertips pressed to the screen, using the remote to turn it on and off. I thought I saw strands of her hair move with the electricity. Just past the TV and outside the window, the sky was a dim, magical blue.

“One day, people aren’t going to remember there were TVs like this,” Blair said. She finally let the TV stay on. A commercial filled the screen. She walked backwards until her legs hit our bed. She sat down. She sighed. “I can’t wait to talk about the good old days.”

“You think people are going to listen to you?” I said, playing along. I could only see the back of her head. It had been a long time since I touched her hair. Sometimes, as we unloaded equipment from the trunk, I’d feel a stray curl brush my shoulder. I hated that I was aware of the touch while she wasn’t.

“My fellow old people will,” Blair said. “We’ll talk about TVs and Yogo Bits and Altoids that had flavor.”

“I forgot about Yogo Bits,” I said. Blair switched the channel. Another commercial filled the screen. A different set of bright colors. A different jingle. I couldn’t hear your thoughts. I scooted closer towards the end of the bed.

Gently, I reached out and combed my fingers through Blair’s hair. She said nothing, only leaning slightly backward into my touch. I began braiding her hair, dutching it to the best of my abilities. I let my knuckles brush against the back of her neck. I liked the knowledge that the touch must’ve felt like everything to her, but seemed like nothing to me.

When the braid was finished, I let her hair go. Without a knot, her hair unspooled at the end, though most of the braid remained in place. We heard footsteps thundering along the concrete hall outside. I scooted backwards on the bed. Blair reached for her braid and brought it around to lie on her chest.

We kissed in empty restrooms. We kissed in stairwells. We kissed in the dark hallways outside of our motel rooms, ice bucket clutched like a hall pass in our hands. We kissed where no one could see us.

At night, we lied side by side, arms touching, feet brushing. Not a word said.

We fucked after the show in Flagstaff. Everyone was gone, off at some party, and Blair and I had the motel room alone. My phone sat on the nightstand, playing the pop songs that had played all summer. After, limbs loose and buzzing, Blair slid off the bed and danced drunkenly by herself in the hazy darkness.

“What are you going to do when this is all over?” Blair asked me once we were redressed and back in bed. I stared up at the textured ceiling. Within a week, we would reach California, where we would finally hit the ocean and could go no further.

“I gotta send out my applications,” I said. In the darkness of the room, so distant from Colby, the applications felt intangible. What were applications compared to the mesas that rose outside our windows, to the slight bristle of hair as I ran my fingers up Blair’s forearms?

“You’re still doing that?” Blair asked.

“Yeah, well, there’s no getting out of it now.”

Blair shifted in the bed. I could feel her leaning over me, looking down at me. Her image slowly sharpened in the darkness.

“It’s not too late. If there’s something you’d rather do, then do it.”

I was suddenly reminded of you, whose voice should’ve entered my head after I turned off the music, but didn’t. It was logical that there would be music at your party. Had you been able to hear our conversation, you would’ve sided with Blair. You two were one of the same, not because of the music, but because you both assigned everything in life a value. If music was worth more than home, you went for the music. If music was worth more than me—well.

The logic was efficient. Brutal.

“It’s a compromise,” I told Blair. “My parents have done everything for me, and now I’m doing something for them.”

Blair stared at me a little longer, her gaze freely judgemental. Perhaps she was weighing me then. Weighing my worth. She fell back on the bed. She sighed.

“It’s not like I’m unhappy,” I said, trying to win her back. “I’m fine with it. Really.”

I knew my words had no effect. This was a girl who left behind her family so she could be herself.

In six days, we would reach the ocean.

Before Phoenix, we took a detour north for the Petrified Forest. You insisted on driving that day, as if afraid someone else would compromise the trip. When we arrived, the visitor's center was barren. The parking lot quiet. I tasted desert on my tongue. We grabbed a map, then walked.

We walked along mesas, gazing out at land so empty the sky touched the earth directly. Rock and pebble carpeted the ground like a more textured sand. The only trees were the petrified ones, fallen and cross-sectioned on the ground, revealing smooth quartz the color of storm clouds. Everything was exposed: the trees, the land, the sky—and yet there was a hush in the air. Some secret still being kept.

We stood and looked out over the horizon, sun stinging our cheeks. Mom's words echoed in my mind—*talk some reason into him*.

My eyes darted up to you. The corners of your lips tightened, but you kept your gaze ahead. *Isn't it amazing*, you thought.

"It is," I said.

*

On the road to Phoenix, you received the call.

“Holy shit,” you said. Booker was at the wheel.

“What?” he asked.

“Holy shit,” you said again.

“*What?*”

“The booking agency just called,” you said. “From Last Week can’t make it to their last gig. They knew we’re headed to LA, and they recommended us to fill in.”

“Hold on, aren’t they opening for—”

“*Yes,*” you said. “The Spoons.”

It said something that even I had heard of The Spoons before. Their songs sometimes played on the radio, and though I never paid them much mind, I knew you conceived of them as legends.

“Wait. We’re opening for The Spoons?” Blair asked from beside me.

“Yes. Two days after our last gig, or what *was* our last gig.” You let out breathless laugh.

“Damn.” You gazed out past the windshield. “I think we’re getting somewhere, guys.”

In Phoenix that night, I met Rubén outside the venue. He had driven an hour down to meet us, though, as far as I knew, he never listened to anything rock. The sky was dimming when doors opened. Rubén had dressed nice for the occasion: dark jeans, a burgundy tee, and suede boots.

He hung out by the merch stand for the majority of the show. He helped sell t-shirts, smiling to each and every customer.

“You don’t have to be so nice,” I said.

“Why not,” he asked, eyebrows scrunched. I shrugged.

“It’s like getting service in New York. People like it when you’re mean.”

We stayed huddled by the merch table until the show ended. You ran up, giving Rubén a small wave, then turned to me.

“Some guy invited us to a party. You comin?” you asked. I glanced at the stage, hoping to catch Blair’s eye, but everyone was gone.

“Who’s going?” I asked.

“Everyone,” you said. “Even Blair.”

I felt Rubén’s gaze on me. He had driven an hour to meet me. He didn’t even know your music. There was also that text he sent me, which still sat in my phone: *I want to talk to you*. There were two ways to read that text, one innocuous, the other purposeful.

“I think I’ll stay behind,” I said. You gave me a long look, then ran off.

Instead of the party, Rubén and I ended up in his car driving around the outskirts of the city. He said he had been down to Phoenix a few times and knew an area with a great view. We drove until we reached an overlook toward the edge of the city. The stars were out, the city lights looking surreal in the desert.

To fill the silence, we talked. I asked how his mother was doing. He asked how Dad was doing.

“He’s alright,” I said. “He forgets small things, mostly. Where he left something. Where he was going. Nothing big, yet,” by which I meant he hadn’t forgotten me. In my head, I did the math again.

“Hey,” he said, interrupting my calculations. “So there was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

I knew this was it.

“I, do you—” he paused briefly, perhaps to gather his wits. “How do you feel about me?”

I knew what he was asking, yet I avoided direct confrontation.

“What do you mean?”

He ran his fingers through his hair, causing a cowlick to spring up in the back. In another life, I might’ve found that charming.

“I mean, who am I to you?”

A stranger, really, like most people in my life. There were times when his words brushed close. Particularly during those nights when we traded secrets over video games. But how can someone really become more than a stranger when you already have someone else who understands everything about you? Who has been there and lived it, who has heard your every thought?

“You’re my friend,” I said. He looked at me with large, vulnerable eyes.

“That makes me sad,” he said bluntly.

“Why?”

“Well, I—I think of you as more than a friend.”

I felt a surge of anger then, despite the somberness in his voice. Whatever frail bridge we had built was broken. I felt empty. Used in his game of loneliness. The truth was that he could’ve fallen in love with anybody. I knew this truth, and he knew at least part of this truth. Just like that, our friendship was ruptured, broken by words spoken out loud.

“I don’t think of you that way,” I finally said, not fighting the slight chill in my voice. He looked down at his lap.

“Yeah, I kind of figured. From your body language. Your words.”

“Then why did you tell me.” Why not just keep quiet?

He looked upwards at the sky.

“I just needed to say it outloud.” He paused. “And since there’s no one else I can tell this to, I figured I might as well tell you.”

I thought to myself then that I could never understand that need—the need to give away secrets. Even with Blair, it was her that had initiated. I liked to think myself different in that I didn’t need a confidant. So established your voice was in my life that I didn’t realize I had a confidant all along.

“We can still be friends,” I said quietly. Rubén gave a small, bitter laugh.

He asked me where he could drop me off. I gave the address for the party. I didn’t want to be in the motel room alone then, and in a foreign city, there was nowhere else I could go. When we finally reached the house, a rather ordinary terra cotta colored home, we exchanged a simple *later*.

I felt oddly disfigured walking into the party. It was held in a small, two bedroom house rented by a pair of college students. The living room lights were off, and music thudded through the frail infrastructure—an explanation for your silence.

I saw Alexander in the line for the bathroom, though his eyes merely gazed drunkenly past me. I thought I saw Fulton in the living room, but it was too dark to be sure. In the kitchen, glass bottles decorated the counter, pretzel crumbs soaking in their spillage. Two girls leaning against the sink looked up.

“Hey,” one of them said. “I know you.”

I had never seen her before.

“You’re that guy’s sister, right? The singer?”

I nodded. Gave a small laugh.

“Yeah. That’s me.”

The girl’s eyes suddenly found mine, despite her tipsiness, and I startled at the sudden sincerity.

“The music is great, but they lyrics are amazing,” she said. “You know, my dad—”

Her friend pulled on her wrist.

“Sorry,” she said to me. “She’s drunk.”

I nodded. “No worries.” I left the kitchen. I needed air.

A pair of glass doors led to the backyard. There, more music played, loud enough that it seemed to throw my own heartbeat off rhythm. Fairy lights had been strung up. In the center of the yard was a glowing pool, a little bit of magic in the dry desert night. There was someone standing on the diving board. People were chanting *jump*. I realized that someone was you. You met my eyes across the pool.

“Hey,” you shouted, words slightly slurred. The underwater pool lights casted quivering, turquoise nets onto your skin. “Come over here. Jump with me.”

“Seriously?” I shouted back. I felt eyes wander my way.

“Come *on*,” you urged. “It’ll be fun.”

It didn’t look fun. It looked cold and wet. I wondered where Blair was. I wanted her to appear and pull me away.

“Come on,” you said again. Before I could protest, drunken hands pushed me forward until I stood on the pool tiles. You grabbed my wrist, pulling me onto the diving board. I was still wearing my shoes.

“Seriously?” I said, hushed so only you could hear. The board bent beneath our weight. Without saying another word, you gave me a sly smile and fell backwards into the pool. With our hands still attached, I fell in after you. For a second, after we’d hit the water, it was quiet. Cold, suspended quiet. Then there was noise.

Noise—loud, frantic, inconsolable. It felt like knives, it felt like panic. It was pain, a familiar pain. Beneath it all, there was your voice:

I don't know where I am going

I don't want to be alone

These people understand

I need to know we're the same

These people are the same

Is she the same?

I don't want to keep a secret

I don't want to stay

Soon

Soon

Soon

I burst through the surface. A moment later, you did too, coughing. The sound of the music faded back in, dull and blurred. You wiped your face, met my gaze. I’d forgotten the full

force of your voice, unsegmented by the music. From the look on your face, it seemed you had also forgotten mine.

*

We drove and drove. The road always continued on. On until California, until ocean. But we were not there yet. So we drove and drove.

In the evenings, I called Mom. She talked about home, about Dad. About how Dad forgot to turn the stove off. About how Dad wanted to call his mother, who was dead. There was fear in her voice, but also something pleading, as if to say *Please come back. Come back soon*. Toward the end of our calls, she always wanted to speak with you. You were always too busy. When I forced the phone into your hand, you offered nothing but rushed, cold responses.

In between cities, Blair and I found pockets of privacy to kiss, to fuck. Sometimes, after pulling away, she gave me a long look, and I knew she was once again weighing my worth. I thought about her family back home—a mother and a step-father I'd only ever had glimpses of. Once, taking an evening walk around the perimeter of our hotel, Blair told me how it all went down when she came out.

“They offered me an ultimatum,” she said, picking at the hem of her sleeve. It was chilly out, the last light of the desert ducking behind the mesas. “Either pretend it never happened, or leave.” She paused. “I left. They didn’t even stop me.”

“Fuck them,” I said, hoping to cheer her up. Instead, her eyes darted to me sharply.

“You’re talking about my mom,” she said. “That woman nursed me.”

I was thrown by her words. The hierarchy suddenly became clearer to me: step-dad, Colby, mom, music, herself. I wasn't sure where I belonged—with Colby or herself.

That night, our arms still brushed beneath the covers. In the morning, we drove and drove.

Having exhausted our playlists, we all took up new hobbies in the van. Fulton began texting a girl he met back in Flagstaff. Blair opened up an ancient Game Boy. Booker played cards in the back row with Alexander. You began writing.

You wrote in a small notepad you kept in your pocket. When a certain lyric enraptured you, you would write and rewrite until we reached the motel.

The night before we reached Nevada, you rose from bed at three AM, hands fumbling frantically for a pen. Then, at the small table near the window, you scribbled endlessly, pausing occasionally to stare blankly ahead. Your thoughts were quiet, but they kept me awake.

How, you wondered, do you put a whole life into words? That evening in the pool. The road in St. Louis. An open palm, a fist. You want them to understand.

“It’s a constant battle,” Rubén once told me, the two of us tucked in a corner of the library, a thick stack of his writing between us. The pages were crinkled and smeared with ink, words crossed out with exes and exes disarmed by loops. “Every story comes from something real. Maybe it’s an article from the newspaper. A footnote in a biography. Some rumor. A secret. Then you write from that, keeping enough of the facts so that it feels real, specific, but also deleting some, making up some, so that it becomes a lie, but also truer than truth. But,” he said, looking up at me, “you gotta know how much of yourself you’re willing to give up. How much you’re willing to change.”

In the dim light of morning, I listened as you lied. I listened as you swapped out ages, swapped out names, swapped out dates. With a stroke of a pen, you changed our history. All so a stranger could understand your story.

In three days, we would reach the ocean.

Nevada continued the onslaught of desert until we reached Las Vegas, the city greeting us with its soft, worn sunset. We played a small gig at the university, then drove downtown to see a magic show. In a tall, glimmering hotel, we sat in the back of an auditorium, the crowd whispering before us. The stage lights flickered on.

First came the card tricks, the fire laced arrows, the women trapped in cages. Then out came the telepathist, a tall woman in heels and a green dress. She alone stood on the stage, staring out into the crowd with imploring eyes. Her assistant roved through the front rows, borrowing belongings from the audience—wrist watches, sunglasses, tubes of lipstick. The telepathist kept her back turned, her shoulders squared, her feet planted together. When all the belongings were gathered, the assistant held up the objects one by one to the telepathist's turned back.

“A watch. A Tissot,” the telepathist declared.

“Sunglasses.”

“Lipstick. Purple.”

The crowd murmured lightly. When she was finished, she turned back around and bowed gracefully. The audience clapped. She smiled politely at the crowd.

“There’s gotta be a mirror somewhere,” Booker whispered beside me. “Or the objects were planted.”

“Maybe she really can read minds,” Blair said, sounding serious. Booker shot her a look, but Blair ignored him.

“I hear they plant fake audience members all the time in these shows,” Booker said. He turned to me. “Don’t you think?”

I hoped so. It was for the better that the woman had crafted an illusion. The alternative, that she had the capability to reach into those strangers’ heads—into any of our heads—seemed too lonesome. What was the point of understanding everyone’s thoughts when no one could hear your own?

*

The day after Las Vegas, we entered California.

The land didn’t look much different from Nevada, though everyone in the van seemed to take a collective exhale as we crossed the state border.

“Can you believe it,” Blair said. “It’s finally happening. We’re going to meet The Spoons *here*, in California.

Perhaps it was too good to be true. Out on the road, we were not wandering, but running. At some point, our pursuers would catch up.

Only an hour after entering California, my phone started ringing. I was sitting in the passenger’s seat. You were driving. You glanced at me curiously. My phone never rang. I scooped the device out of my backpack and looked at the caller. It was Mom.

“Mom?” I asked, answering. At first, there was silence. Then Mom let out a shuddering breath. “Mom?” I repeated, suddenly frightened. “What’s wrong?”

The van fell silent. I felt eyes on the back of my neck.

“Mom, just breathe,” I said. “What’s happening?”

After calming down, Mom told me that Dad was in the hospital. He had gotten confused that morning and took too much of his blood pressure medicine. When he collapsed in the hallway, flesh and bone smacking mercilessly against the hardwood, Mom called an ambulance. They were in the hospital now.

“I just—I don’t know what to do,” Mom said.

“Is he stable?” I asked.

“Yes, but—but—”

But things were different now. The disease, formerly a name and a timetable, was suddenly tangible.

“What else have the doctors told you?” I asked.

“I—I don’t know. I don’t understand what they’re saying.”

She paused for a moment, as if to collect herself.

“When will you be home?” she finally asked.

I looked at you. Your lips were tight, your eyes staring ahead. A few mountains had risen in the horizon, hazy and purple. I could hear your thoughts. You were afraid. Afraid and angry.

“Mom, we’re staying a few extra days in L.A.,” I said. “The band got a big gig.”

I knew how meaningless the words were to Mom.

“Can’t you book an early flight home?” Mom asked. “They don’t need you there, do they?”

The words hurt. I wasn't sure how to tell Mom that it wasn't just about the t-shirts and the driving.

"I'll see what I can do, Mom," I finally said.

In the moments after I hung up, nobody spoke. Everyone in the back rows pretended to be busy. I suddenly wished that it was just you and me.

After taking a deep breath, I told you what happened. Your fingers tightened over the steering wheel with each passing second.

It's his fault, it's his fault, it's his fault, you thought.

"So what are you going to do?" you asked in the end. You could read my thoughts. You already knew the answer. But you asked nonetheless, and I realized you didn't want to know what I thought, you wanted to know what I'd say.

"Mom needs help," I said. "She needs support."

And Dad, I thought. *I can't leave him alone no matter what he has done.*

"But you said so yourself," you said. "He's stable. He'll be fine."

We both knew it was about more than that. It was about the oceans, the rivers, the land—it was about staying together, about being not alone. After a summer of foreign cities, of empty deserts, of place after place we did not belong, how could you not understand that?

"At some point, you're going to have to give something up," you said, staring ahead. "How long are you going to let them control you? Don't you want to—I don't know—be *yourself?*"

I stared down at my lap.

“Is that what you’re doing?” I said. I thought of the lyrics you’ve been singing for weeks. All of our secrets, misshapen by your hands and poured out into the world—our secrets, which kept us together. “You’re going to give them up, just like that? And for what, a gig?”

“It’s more than just a gig,” you said. “This is everything I’ve been working for. This is what I *want*.”

“But what about them?” I said. “They gave up everything they wanted for *us*.” The ocean, the rivers. “How can you just leave them behind like that? How—how can you be so selfish?”

Your shoulders tensed. You thought of thrown textbooks, the flash of a hand.

“Don’t you remember,” you said slowly, “everything he did to us? Don’t you think I deserve to be a little selfish?”

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

I remember. I remember it all. Perhaps that was why I felt so betrayed. If you remembered, then you should have understood the need to return, the need to not be alone despite everything.

“What about me,” I asked. “If I get in the way, are you just going to give me up?”

You thought of sunflowers and glittering nickels.

“I’m not the one who promised,” you said. Then your hand reached out. You flipped on the radio. Static first took over the van. With shaky fingers, you turned it to the local station. Some pop song was playing, the singer crooning about love, about betrayal. Just like that, I could no longer hear your thoughts. I was suddenly aware of everyone behind us, shifting uncomfortably in their seats. The mountains reappeared in the edges of my vision. Gone were the

corn fields and the nickels. We were back in California again, the road endless until we hit the ocean.

We reached L.A. that night and played our first show. In the aftermath, you disappeared off to a party while Blair accompanied me back to the motel. She sat quietly in the corner chair while I booked a plane ticket at the desk.

“So you’re really leaving, huh?” she said. She sounded wistful, like I was already out of her grasp.

“Yeah, well, they’re my parents,” I said. “I can’t just leave them.”

Blair hummed. She shifted in her chair.

“It’s really too bad,” she said. “I wanted you there. For the gig.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. My finger hovered over the purchase button. “But when you come back, we can always hang out. I can drive over to your apartment.”

Blair didn’t look up at me then, opting instead to study the carpet. I knew she had weighed my worth. We could kiss and we could touch, but we were hidden. I was hidden. And, as long as I was hidden, we were futureless.

“You’re not angry, are you?” I asked, needing the reassurance. Blair shook her head, her hair swaying with the movement.

“No, no,” she said softly. “It’s your parents. I get it.”

On my last day, we reached the ocean.

None of us had been to the ocean before, but we all had our own visions of it. I'd always imagined crowded sands, beach towels, and bright, blue skies. The beaches you see on postcards and calendars.

When we arrived, the beach was empty, sand untrampled by footprints. There was no sun that day. Just milky, grey light, the sky textureless, like a smooth riverstone. The waves appeared at times choppy and rhythmless.

“So this is it,” you said.

We rented a boat just as we planned. The boat was a small powerboat with four seats, the front deck large enough for three people to lie down. Booker was eager to drive and so we let him. We were all quiet as the boat skimmed across the water. The wind whipped past our faces so fast that it was hard to breathe. We all kept our eyes toward the horizon. Because the sky was grey, so was the water. Fifteen minutes out into the ocean, the shore having long faded into a hazy strip of beige behind us, it was as though we'd entered a black and white film.

We stopped twenty minutes out from shore. With the engine cut, there was nothing but the sounds of the waves, both dull and roaring. Booker opted to lie on the deck, a paperback obscuring his face. Blair, Fulton and Alexander opened the cooler of beers in the back. You tugged off your shirt and stood at the edge of the deck, scanning the water. Then you lept in. The water rippled briefly in your wake before your head bobbed up again. Left standing on the boat, I wasn't sure what to do. These were, at the end of the day, not my people. You were my people, and you were no longer on the boat, but in the ocean. Tugging off the t-shirt I had over my bathing suit, I jumped into the water as well.

I remember still Mom's words about how dangerous the ocean could be. What she never told me was how big it was. On the boat, the shore was distant, but not unreachable. As soon as I

jumped into the water, it was as though I had landed in the middle of the world, and everything—the boat, the shore—was suddenly out of grasp. The water beneath my chin, as opaque as land, ran directly into the horizon, where it met an equally grey sky that reached and curved above my head, looming large and overwhelming. There was no ground beneath my feet. If I sank, I would just keep sinking and sinking. The water—it embraces you.

“Wait up,” I called out. You were paddling toward the horizon. You glanced back, then slowed down.

The ocean around us was loud, and when I had finally caught up to you, we were nearly eight yards from the boat. We hovered in place, treading water and staring at the horizon. There was a dim glow of light where the water met the sky, as though the lamp that lit the world rested just beneath the water’s surface. “It feels like I can touch it,” you said. In the loudness of the ocean, your words sounded like a secret. It felt as though, for a moment, we had reached a peace treaty, that day in the van forgotten. I glanced back at the boat. Our bodies rocked with the force of the waves, which seemed to grow in power without warning.

“We shouldn’t swim too far,” I said. The inside of my chest felt heavy, as it sometimes did when I spent too long in water. You glanced back at the boat as well. The heaviness in my chest clenched into an ache. I forced a smile onto my face.

“Race you,” I said.

I remember that I had a second head start. But you were taller than me now, and faster. You easily sped ahead. So caught up in chasing after you, I didn’t even notice when you had disappeared. I remember stopping for a moment, glancing left and right. I remember realizing that there was a tide now, heavy and strong. I remember a sudden, sharp pain tearing through my head. I remember your voice—

air

air

air

There was the sound of someone shouting, but I wasn't sure who it was. I just remember waves crashing against my back and saltwater in my eyes, causing me to squeeze them shut. I remember an unexpected downward pull, a wave folding me into the ocean. Water ran down my throat, rough, salty, and my feet kept trying to touch a ground that wasn't there. My chest burned. My heart thudded. I opened my eyes—

And I saw blue. Before me and all around me, a gradient of blue, fading from the most delicate of shades into a rich navy. There was nothing but the sound of rushing water. It was almost peaceful. Then I felt the spike of pain again. Your voice:

air—

air—

air—

There was a flash of something—an arm—only a few feet away, then a rush of water hit my back, and my head broke through the surface. I gasped for breath, only to be forced back under. More blue, the pressure in my chest building. Then air again. Cold, sharp air. I heard a distant shout. Something red flew through the air—a life preserver. With a single minded focus, I swam until my hands grasped hard plastic.

The first breath of air felt jagged in my throat. I coughed, my eyes stinging. There were still voices shouting, and when I looked over at the boat, I realized everyone was shouting at me. They were pointing at the water.

air—

air—

air—

You were still underwater. You were still underwater only a few feet away, and nobody else but me knew you were there. I stared. I couldn't move. Wouldn't move. I had my arms hooked around the life preserver. I was safe.

air—

air—

The shouts from the boat turned frantic, angry. I ignored them.

air—

I remember that, when you were young, you would imagine our funerals during the late hours of the night. Dad's funeral always came first, since he was the oldest. You imagined burying him in that cemetery behind the schoolyard, the one closest to home. You placed me, yourself, and Mom next to his tombstone, flowers in our hands. Sometimes, you made Mom cry. We never cried.

Mom died next, of course. You buried her right next to Dad, even though, according to Mom, that was not Buddhist custom. At her funeral, we held flowers again, throwing them into the casket as it lowered. This time, we cried.

And after Mom came me. At my funeral, there was only ever you. You holding a single flower. Then, finally, when you died, the cemetery was silent. There were no husbands, wives, friends, children. No flowers. No tears. Just four headstones beneath the shade of an oak tree, a family reunited.

air—

The ocean, the waves.

In the movies, time slows down when you're about to die. Time also slows down when you're watching someone else die.

Help—

In that slowed time, I imagined a world without you. A world where, after I let the ocean swallow you, I was cut free from one more tether. There would be the grief, the sorrow, the days where I couldn't move, but time would pass. One day, Dad would die. Mom too. Then, alone in this world, I would be free.

Please—

The ocean, the rivers, the land—you crossed the desert just to reach the water again, and I came with you because I feared you would be alone. Lost in this world, I'd forgotten that our loneliness was also our freedom. That what connected us was also our chains.

You—

Another wave.

You—

Distant shouts.

You—

Soon, I thought.

A flash of dark hair. Your head suddenly broke through the surface. Another life preserver flew through the air. Even after you had grasped it, eyes squeezed shut and body wracking with coughs, all I could do was stare.

On the boat, we sat on damp towels on the deck.

Your lips were blue, as were your nails. Blair rummaged through our bags, trying to find more towels. The guys hovered awkwardly in the back, occasionally coming forth to ask if you were okay. You waved them off. After a few minutes, everyone decided it was best to head back. We shivered together as the wind brushed past our shoulders. You had only one thought.

Traitor.

I had only one thought as well.

Would you have done anything different?

You never answered my question, and by next morning, I was gone.

For a few months after, your voice stayed. When the tour ended, you returned home. You rented an apartment near the university. You visited every other weekend. Gradually, the music dragged you further and farther away. You moved to St. Louis to work with a producer. Then, a year later, you followed him to California. Your life became about the music. You composed by day, sung by night.

Remember what I said about the music? How it shapes you? Changes you? Not spiritually, but physically, in ways visible in the stark colors of a brain scan. I like to think that was what happened. That, one day, when your voice simply disappeared, it was because the music had finally changed you. It was no longer a vibration, no longer an exterior force. It was a part of you. You were one with the music.

IV.

Tinnitus. A ringing in the ear.

Tinnitus itself is not a condition. Rather, it is a symptom of other conditions. People have described their tinnitus as sounding like anything from dial tones to ocean waves.

I became fascinated by tinnitus my first year of medical school. What I found most intriguing was the fact that the ringing is not generated by a vibration. Rather, the ringing occurs for reasons similar to a coding error, meaning that the noise has no external source, but is heard nonetheless. If I could, I would describe to you the very neurons at which this malfunction originates, detailing both diameter and myelination, but the exact mechanisms of tinnitus are still unknown. Currently, the most prevalent treatments include playing white noise or music to drown out the ringing. These treatments felt to me unsatisfactory, but also so very human. What else exudes humanity like combating the invisible with brute force? Like simultaneously living and fighting with what ails you?

I remember that your voice disappeared on a Saturday afternoon. You were twenty-four. I was twenty-six. I had ignored the silence at first. Then, after three days, I thought you were dead. With shaking fingers, I checked your social media accounts, only to find that you had just posted something that morning: a picture of the California sunrise from a concrete balcony, the colors of the sky perhaps paler in the photograph than what you saw. I reasoned with myself that the silence was just temporary. It always was before.

Come Christmas, when you finally visited, I asked you what had happened.

“What do you mean, what happened?” you asked.

“What happened to...” I said, and I realized we had never really given a name to what we had. It had never needed a name. “What happened to, you know,” I finally said, tapping my head.

“Oh.” You shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it had just run its course.”

Your face was neutral. It was unnerving to merely hear your voice. I couldn’t tell what was true from what was false. I couldn’t tell if you felt the same dread and fear as I did. I had to read your face, and your face was empty.

A year passed with only the silence. Dad grew worse and worse. On a sunny day in May, he forgot who I was. He remembered by breakfast the next morning. This occurred again and again until his forgetfulness was nothing new.

By Christmas the next year, everything had changed. You were discovered. Your music was playing on the radio. You were gigging at festivals, in stadiums. Mom cared not for your newfound fame and forced you to help us clean out the basement in preparation for the new year.

“I’m going to set up a garage sale,” Mom declared, gazing out at the clutter of boxes. Lost in the mess were old toys and books and plastic bags stuffed with baby clothes.

“A garage sale?” I repeated, a little disbelieving. Our neighbors had held many garage sales over the years, but never us. Anything we owned that had ran its usefulness eventually found its way into the basement, packed away into boxes so as to hopefully be forgotten about. I couldn’t imagine these toys—the toys Mom had once flung off the shelf to create a dent in the wall—displayed neatly on a plastic table for all the world to touch and see, much less buy. We were changing, I realized. Changing into the people I always wanted to be. This made me feel sorrow.

In a cardboard box barely holding itself together, you and I found a stack of our old math textbooks, the pages cool to the touch. We took a moment to just flip through them, pausing on pages that held for us a certain memory. Later, you brought them upstairs and asked Dad if he wanted to keep them. Dad looked up at you in confusion.

“Those aren’t mine,” he said. Just like that, your face shuttered closed.

You didn’t visit next Christmas.

By twenty-seven, I had moved out of my apartment and back into the house. Mom was aging too, and she needed help taking care of Dad. In the evenings, while Dad rested in the bedroom, Mom and I cooked dinner in the kitchen. Perhaps because she was liberated from Dad’s hearing, Mom began telling me about the past.

“When I was young,” Mom told me one evening, “my mother would take me to buy fresh squid from the market. She told me the freshest squid were colored in black, and the freshest oysters, when cracked open, had a rainbow sheen.”

Beyond the kitchen table, the window blinds were still open, even though it was late in the evening. Only a little earlier, I could see the trees cutting silhouettes into the sky. Now, all I saw were our own reflections bustling back and forth between the stove and the chopping board, reminding me that anyone outside on the street could see us too. These two women, framed in the warmth of orange light—what would they think of us, I wondered. Trapped in the chaos of their own lives, would these strangers think us ordinary? Admirable?

“I wound up meeting your father at the market.” This Mom said at the stove again, but on a different day. She gave her stories to me in pieces, as if afraid I’d choke on them if she fed them to me all at once. “I was seventeen. He was... twenty-one? Twenty-two? He had hair then, and it was very curly. Curly hair was rare where I grew up, and I thought it made your father look very handsome.”

I wrinkled my nose at her words. Mom’s description reminded me that Dad was more than just a father. He was also a lover, a man.

“He came by to visit my sister once. They didn’t talk for more than a few minutes, but my sister told me after that she didn’t like him. I don’t know what she saw, how she knew...”

Sometimes, I wondered why Mom only told me these stories in Dad’s absence. On TV, couples always got together to tell people how they met. Love stories, I thought, were meant to be told proudly, but Mom whispered them to me like secrets.

“Your father was always angry.” This, again, on another day. “When he got angry, he liked to destroy whatever was in sight. I remember, once, after he got denied a job in Fuzhou, he took his umbrella and battered down all the flowers in front of our apartment.”

Like a child, I thought. No response.

“It was after that job, actually, that your father told us we were moving. I didn’t want to move. My family didn’t want us to move either. There was nothing they could do about it, though. The day before we left, my mother gave me a packet of soil from our hometown. She told me to stir the soil into boiling water and to drink it when I became homesick.”

I was particularly charmed by this last story. During my first few years of college, I often felt an ache in my chest that I grew to know as homesickness. Walking back to my dorm late at night, or microwaving a meal alone in the downstairs kitchen, I tried to pin down this ache. To transcribe this feeling into words. *Hunger in the chest* was what I settled on. Homesickness felt like hunger in the chest. How, then, I wondered, does one satisfy this hunger?

Mom’s story felt like the last piece to this puzzle. What better way to satisfy that hunger than filling your body with home itself? What greater comfort is there than carrying home in your body, feeling it announce its presence with warmth and bitterness on your tongue, then settling heavily in your belly?

“Did you drink it?” I asked, imagining Mom stirring a dark packet of soil into warm water in a small Philadelphia kitchen, the foreign city large and impenetrable in the window behind her. Mom shook her head.

“No. I threw it away.”

I remember losing my patience with Dad a number of times over the last few years. Sometimes, all it took was that confused look on his face. I didn’t think he deserved to be confused. He deserved to remember.

After dinner once, Dad began pestering me about his mother. Ah ma had been dead for a few years then, but he spoke of her as if she had just dropped by the house the day before. I hoped to pass him off to Mom, but Mom was napping in the bedroom.

“Where is she,” Dad demanded, as though I had taken her and hidden her somewhere in the house. There were small tremors of anger in his voice that I hadn’t heard in years. I thought my knee jerk reactions to his anger had gone extinct, but I instantly felt my jaw tighten, my chest burn. I whipped around to find him staring at me with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

“Goddammit, Dad,” I said. “She’s dead.”

Dad looked startled for a second, but then his eyes narrowed again.

“You are lying. Where is she?”

I didn’t know what I was doing until Dad took a step back, his posture tense, ready for action. To my right, my hand was raised in the air, palm open. There was too much energy beneath my skin, energy I needed to release. How easy it would have been to just let go. How rightful.

But this man in front of me, one who couldn’t even remember his mother was dead—was he the same man I used to hate?

I lowered my hand.

“Just... just go,” I said. When Dad continued to stand there, I turned around and headed toward my room. There, the anger festered, hot, buzzing, like an infestation of wasps in my blood. I threw a pencil cup from my desk at the wall, watching as the mix of pens and mechanical pencils scattered out onto the floor. For a minute after, I stared, thinking about things as mundane as grocery lists. Then I kneeled onto the floor and quickly picked the pens and pencils up, feeling too much like a child.

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Music and white noise are still the most prevalent treatments for tinnitus, but a new treatment has been in the works for the past few years.

After medical school, I finished up my residency in Cleveland before moving back to Colby, where I got a job at the local hospital. It was there that I stumbled across a lab ran by one of my colleagues: the Williams Notch Therapy Lab. While traditional tinnitus treatments involved playing noises to cover the ringing, Williams' notch therapy believed that they could retrain the brain to ignore the ringing altogether.

To do so, they have their subjects bring in music, preferably music that they enjoy. The researchers then run the subjects through a test, determining the frequency at which their tinnitus rings. Once the frequency is identified, the researchers cut that frequency out of the subjects' music, thereby "notching" it. The subjects then listen to the notched music while performing their daily tasks, like washing the dishes, or cleaning their house. After six months, they come back to the lab. They report whether their tinnitus has gotten quieter.

The hypothesis is that, if a person doesn't listen to a certain sound for a long time, can their brains rewire to ignore it?

A few weeks after I moved back into the house, Mom read a study that said music could be good for Alzheimer's patients. For the entire afternoon that day, she sat on the living room

carpet trying to figure out how to boot back up our old stereo system. Once that was done, she plugged in her phone. Cold, pentatonic notes soon flooded the living room.

“What is that?” I asked, wandering in through the doorway. Mom was frowning down at her phone.

“Music from when your father and I were young,” Mom said. “Come on. Go get your father. Let’s see if this works.”

I went into the bedroom to fetch Dad. He had been quiet that week, mostly watching TV and keeping to himself. That morning, he had not recognized me. This kind of day was no longer a bad day. It was just an ordinary day.

“Dad,” I said, knocking on the bedroom door. Dad looked up, blinking at me as if trying to figure me out. “Come with me to the living room. Mom has a surprise.”

We slowly made our way out of the bedroom. In the living room, a new song was on, this one softer, but also melancholic. Bright piano notes filled the air, and a woman’s voice soon joined it, clear and strong. Dad paused by the couch, his hand resting on the back of the cushions. Mom was still seated on the carpet. She looked at him expectantly, nervously. Her fingers plucked at the hem of her jeans. None of us moved. None of us talked. When the song finally ended, Mom cleared her throat.

“Did you recognize that?” Mom asked. Dad’s lips twitched with a small smile.

“Hong Dou,” Dad said, sounding sure. “You used to sing this at the karaoke bars.”

Relief crossed Mom’s face.

“It was the only song I knew all the lyrics to,” Mom said. “You were a much better singer. You would sing any song by Liu Jing.”

“That’s because Liu Jing is the best,” Dad said. “All you ever listened to were pop songs that came on the radio.”

A smile unfolded on Mom’s lips.

“You remember,” she said, sounding breathless. Dad let out a small chuckle.

“Of course I remember.”

Once, in the long hours of the afternoon, I heard “Unchained Melody” drifting quietly through the house. Immediately, my mind flooded with the smell of oil paints, rich and bitter. I crept out of my bedroom and peeked through the doorway, half expecting to see Mom at her easel, young and dark haired, spreading her first dollop of paint on a blank canvas, honeyed sunlight bleaching her eyelashes, a worn vinyl spinning lazily on an old turntable. Instead, the living room was dim, the blinds shuttered, sunlight glowing around the edges. There was no turntable, only a dusty stereo, and instead of Mom alone, standing at her easel, it was both Mom and Dad, their bodies pressed chest to chest as they swayed to the music. Their eyes were closed. They were alone in their own world.

The summer I turned thirty, your new single hit the radio. The song played in grocery stores, at gas stations, the pool. It was the song of the summer. The song that would one day bring back the taste of cheap soda and experimental cigarettes for that year’s teenagers. Your voice, your words—

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

The song once came on in the house. Mom had left the kitchen radio on after washing dishes, and I had stumbled in for an afternoon snack. Dad was in the living room. Upon hearing your voice, I moved to switch the station, but then Dad was suddenly there, standing quietly in the doorway. There was a haunted look on his face.

“Where is your brother?” he asked. I stared back in shock. It had been a while since he last asked about you. You had not visited in years.

“He’s in California,” I replied, though I wasn’t actually sure. You could’ve been across the world for all I knew. Dad frowned at my words.

“When is he coming back?”

In the months before Ah ma passed away, Dad lied to her all the time.

When are you visiting?

Next week.

Will you stay once you’re back?

Of course.

“Soon,” I said, the words empty in my mouth. “He’s visiting soon.”

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

I remember how the fear of being hit was almost unbearable. How the dread takes over your whole body, sour and heavy in your veins, like a paralyzing agent that, when fully metabolized, leaves you petrified and cold. When skin finally meets skin, it is almost a relief.

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

I remember being angry. I remember daydreams with heavy glasses in my hands. I remember daydreams where I could be as relentless as I wanted to be. I remember being angry because it made me feel powerful, and wanting to be powerful because I was afraid.

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

I remember the kinder moments too. The moments that I treasure so deeply I rarely try to remember them, fearing that the act of remembering will rewrite them.

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

I remember that first moment in the pool, the silence all around me. I remember being alone. I remember being free.

What else do you want to know? What am I missing?

After the incident with the radio, I began experimenting.

For a week, I attempted to abstain from music. The task was impossible. Mom had her phone hooked up to the stereo for most of the day. On my way to work, I unconsciously turned on the radio. Commercial jingles chimed from the TV. Invisible speakers played pop songs at the grocery store.

It was my inability to avoid the music that drove me to my new idea. Late one evening, instead of taking my usual shower, I plugged up the bathtub and let it fill with warm water. When the tub was full, I stepped in, lying down to let the water cover my legs, my chest, my head. In the water, the world was quiet. I waited for the spike of pain, the frantic entrance of your voice. I waited until I could no longer hold my breath and burst through the water's surface.

Not even the water had worked.

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If the answer wasn't in the silence, then perhaps it was in the music.

Shortly after my week of failed experiments, I went back to the Williams lab. I spoke with the PI and toured the lab. Back home, I got ahold of their studies. I read them during the late hours of the night until my eyes burned from the computer light. After a month of reading, I finally approached the lab again. I told them I was interested and asked if there was anything I could do. So here I am now.

Now in this lab with its white walls and white floors. Now with a CD in my hands, your voice just a click of a button away.

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

I remember. I do. But you wanted more than that, didn't you? Not just the answer, but also the response. You wanted me to speak. To reveal my secrets to the world and break free. But each time you tell your story, you are changed. You rewrite your memories. You shift numbers, shift names. You break down truths to form some greater truth, all so you can be understood.

But who will know you, in the end, when you have become a completely different person? A person with memories formed out of fragments of truth, who can only relate to strangers through lies? What will you do when you are all alone?

I told you once that I would not leave you behind, but the silence hasn't worked, the water hasn't worked. So now, I turn to the music.

The patient whose CD I hold in my hand now arrived three days ago. During the initial interview, the patient described her tinnitus as an electronic beeping. Alienish, she said. Sounds

she imagined one might hear from the control panel of a flying saucer. The beeping kept her up at night. Then she noticed it during pockets of the day, when the room around her was quiet.

Many researchers believe that the origin of such noises comes from the maladaptive reorganization of the auditory cortex. But within the neurons' ability to adapt is also its ability to reverse. Thus comes the hypothesis that removing a certain sound from one's daily life can cause the brain to rewire and ignore it.

Conversely, then, if one wants to bring a certain sound back, then perhaps the only way is to listen to it.

Do you remember? Tell me, do you remember?

Sitting alone in my office, I slide the CD back into the computer. The same stack of files pop up. I open the first file. I slip on my headphones. I click *play*. I listen.