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April 10, 2017

Animals

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2017

Animals

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An abstract of a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors

**Creative Writing** 

2017

### Abstract

## Animals By Darby Jardeleza

Animals is a collection of six short stories that serve as answers to several questions such as: "Is it possible to love someone without understanding him or her?" "What does it take to make someone incapable of love?" and "What is the difference between a good person and a bad person?" Through the experiences of the collection's characters, I have attempted to answer these fundamental questions in a manner that acknowledges the complexity of the questions themselves. This collection deals extensively with the thematic thread of animals, which suggests that human behavior, like animal behavior, is rooted in survival. In addition to this metaphor, several stories such as "Animals" and "Blood of the Air" experiment with nonchronological structures and were largely influenced by the work of Alice Munro. Perhaps the most important component of this collection is depth of character, which was influenced by the stories of Eric Puchner. Animals

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**Creative Writing** 

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advisor, Jim Grimsley. You always know when two characters need to have a talk. I've never had a better teacher. I don't know how to say thank you. It would probably take a whole story.

Thank you to my parents and brothers, my muses. I write down so much of what you say.

Thank you to my friends, Alex Brodie and Katherine Hur. You are always the first to read my stories. Thank you for the pep talks and all the hours you've spent discussing with me people who aren't even real.

Thank you to my committee members, Joseph Skibell and Laura Otis, as well as the Emory Creative Writing Department. Thank you for Stipe, for Sudler, for your time and recommendation letters, for all the kind things you have said and the recognition you have shown my characters. I'm so grateful to have friends who appreciate them.

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### Yardwork

I had several days after Conor left and before Miriam arrived to sit at the window and see the at the state of the yard and the state of my house. Conor's friends still gathered in the driveway to play basketball without him. Sometimes I brought them water. They were mostly boys he knew from working construction, though some were old friends from high school. It bothered me a little that they came to my house when Conor was absent but they were always polite and moved the trashcans to the curb on Mondays. I don't think he told them he'd be spending the summer with his father. They asked after him. There were usually about four on any given day, sometimes more if they brought their grade-school-aged little brothers, and they didn't swear much, except for the Jamaicans but I didn't know the meanings of any of their words. I only assumed they were curses because of the venom with which they uttered them. Strange words floated in through the open front window, words like "bumboclaat" and "batty boy" that I muttered to myself as I did crosswords. The homeowner's association complained once but didn't pursue it. Probably because of the cancer, or else because they knew my husband had left me for a slut named Denise with an Etsy store and a cherry-red glazed vinyl porno mouth.

It's not a God-given mouth. It's a manmade orifice. Conor showed me pictures of aging adult entertainers in an effort to prove that Denise's face would deflate in a decade or two, that her décolletage would come to resemble fruit leather. I told him I wished he wouldn't talk about that with me. But later, staring in the mirror, I thought I looked quite thin. I don't need a porno mouth. I have a disease.

I really shouldn't be left alone for long. Those days between Conor's leaving and Miriam's arriving were evidently more than I could handle. I shaved my head the first day and that was fine. The first time I was sick, I didn't shave my head at all, just let it fall out in clumps. By the time it was over, I had bald spots interspersed with long threads of fragile hairs and it was more pathetic than a dog with a cone on its head. The second round, Miriam suggested I just shave it off beforehand, for practical purposes, so we didn't have to keep removing the rolley thing at the bottom of the vacuum cleaner and hacking through webs of hair. I really didn't want to shave it though, I am-- *was*-- quite attached to my hair and eyebrows and eyelashes. Among other things of this world. Miriam said she'd shave hers too in solidarity-- she even went first. I think she was only about thirteen years old. What thirteen year old has the guts to do that? And people made fun of her at school, even her teachers-- the ones who didn't know-- but I don't think she noticed. Naturally, I had to go through with it. It wasn't so bad. Being bald is better than that burning smell a malfunctioning vacuum cleaner gives off.

So I shaved my head and did crosswords by the window. Or solitaire on the laptop. Then I got to reading the news online, which I know is bad for me because it gets me worked up, really worked up and ready to start a political blog, so I had to cut myself off from that. Then I spent \$200 on Denise's Etsy shop. She makes hair clips and headbands and things out of rhinestones and fake flowers. I hated them. They arrived quickly. When I took them out of the box, they shed glitter on the floor. She hadn't even attempted to conceal the globs of hardened hot glue that held cloth peonies and nubs of artificial baby's breath in place. There was glitter all over the house and I kept finding it on my body. I hid the contraband where Miriam wouldn't stumble upon it, then went to throw the shipping box in the garbage bin outside.

Some of the boys were out there shooting hoops and I realized I'd forgotten to put on a hat. I waved but they didn't see. When I went to throw the box away, a folded piece of paper slipped out. I picked it up and stuck it in my waistband.

I had trouble getting the box in the bin. One of the boys broke off from the group and approached me.

"Need some help?" he asked. I handed him the box and he collapsed it.

"Thanks."

"I've been meaning to ask you," he said, "about the yard. I could mow the lawn, if you want."

"Oh, my daughter's coming home soon. She'll take care of it," I said. "But thank you." I went inside and he went back to his game.

I settled down in my armchair by the window and, for a minute, watched the boy who'd helped me. I should have gotten his name. I thought about calling Conor and asking that he tell his friends not to come by anymore unless he was there. I removed and unfolded the paper that had fallen out of the box.

It was a handwritten note from Denise that read: *Dear Abby* (I couldn't use my actual name, of course. Though she didn't seem to notice that the shipping address was the same as her husband's old residence.) *Dear Abby, thank you so much for your purchase! I have to admit you are my biggest customer, and I can't tell you how grateful I am that you appreciate my work. I started this business because I wanted to make use of my craftsmanship hobbies and talents, but between you and me, sales have not been great and money is a big limiting factor. But thanks to you, Urban Bohemian Accessories stays afloat, at least for now! I have included several extra pieces, just to say thanks. I truly hope these hair accessories make you feel beautiful. Denise.* 

Oh, Jesus Christ.

I picked up the phone and called Miriam.

"Mom," she said.

"There's a boy out front here, one of Conor's friends."

Short pause. "Okay. Is he bothering you?"

"No, not at all," I said. "He's..." I couldn't look away from the note. It was written in gel pen and all the "a's" were formed like typographical a's instead of typical handwritten ones. The letters were round and full, like spray insulation that swells before it hardens.

"He's what?"

I refolded the letter and put it on the side table by my chair.

"He offered to help with the yard. Maybe when you get here, he can help you."

"That's okay," she said. "I have a plan. I want it to look a certain way."

"Well maybe he could do the gutters," I said. "And blow the pine needles off the roof."

"No, I want to do that," Miriam said. "I like to see the frogs in the tubes."

"The what?"

"There are all these frogs that like to sleep in the ventilation tubes that come out of the roof."

Outside, the boy checked up with one of the others. None of them wore shirts. No doubt I'd be hearing from the homeowner's association about that. Especially because half these kids were black. Once, they called to inform me that a suspicious looking character had been spotted "sizing up" my house. When I asked what he looked like, the lady said he was a Mexican. (She said this last word, "Mexican," in a whisper.) The suspicious looking character turned out to be my husband, assessing which parts of the house to power wash. My husband-- ex-husband-- is three quarters Lebanese. I made him go out in Conor's sagging pants and a flannel buttoned all the way to the top and look in our windows. When they called again, I threatened to bring the wrath of the ACLU down upon them.

"I want you to meet this boy when you come home. He's not bad looking." She said she didn't really want to.

Miriam arrived and cleaned out the refrigerator, replaced the air filter and a torn window screen. She drove me to the hospital for the first appointment and helped me with crossword puzzles until I started vomiting. Then she read aloud the interesting intersections.

That first night, I slept in the bathroom, on the dog bed Conor bought me. Miriam brought glasses of Pedialyte that tasted like viscous sweat. She killed time cutting her hair with the kitchen scissors, napping in the bathtub. She knows I don't like to be awake alone.

Every round, I throw up more. I retch like I'm bringing it all the way up from my feet. When I couldn't stop, she called Conor and asked if he'd left any weed in his room, which he had because he didn't want to bring it on the plane. She made brownies and I was able to sleep.

The next day, I sat by the window and watched her work in the yard. I like doing that. I think she's beautiful. She wore my overalls-- the ones I'd put on to paint the house-- to mow the lawn and do the yardwork. The boys watched her when her back was turned. She'd nod slightly but otherwise didn't acknowledge them. Most of them went back to the game but that one who'd helped me watched her. He didn't speak to her. He had no good reason.

"Have you spoken to your dad lately?" I asked Miriam when she came inside. She wore those overalls with a fraying sports bra underneath, boots, and gloves, which she removed. She was sweating; threads of hair stuck to her neck. Her skin was the most unfair gold color. It glinted with subleached hairs. How did that happen? I can't even toast a marshmallow to a good golden color.

"On the phone yesterday," she said and filled a glass with ice.

"How is he?"

"Fine."

"You don't know if he's having money problems, do you?"

"Doubt it," she said. "If you're worried about the treatment, don't be. He's got it."

"Maybe I should get a job."

"Doing what?" she said. "You're sick. Let him pay."

I would like to know, I don't say, why he pays. But that is not an appropriate conversation to have with your daughter about her father. I know what appropriate conversations are.

I asked her to bring water to Conor's friends.

"Can't they just drink out of the hose?"

"I always bring them water. Here, I'll do it," I said, making a motion to get up.

"No, I've got it," she said and filled a pitcher.

I watched her carry it outside with a stack of cups. The boys stopped and watched her set the pitcher on the ground, nodding and probably saying thank you but I couldn't hear. That one -he stepped forward and poured himself a cup, then drank it while looking at Miriam as if he wanted her to watch him drink water. Miriam didn't watch. She turned to go back to work but he said something and she looked back. *What's your name?* he must have asked and she told him. He held his hand over his chest and said his but I couldn't make it out. Then, *thanks for the water*, probably, because he tipped the cup up.

I went upstairs to lie down.

When I woke, the windows were dark and the crickets were making noise. The toads too. I don't understand how little things can be so loud. Downstairs, Miriam was having a beer and cooking black beans and rice for dinner. She held the phone between her ear and shoulder, listening with her back to me.

"I thought it might help with the nausea. I'll pay you back for it."

She paused. "No, I want to. It did help, I think. I didn't know what else to do."

She opened the spice cabinet and reached blindly over her head for the cumin. She

brought her hand down grasping coriander, tried again, got cinnamon. Get it, I thought, come on,

baby. Get it.

"Thanks," she said, turning and seeing me. "Listen-- I've got to go. Mom's up."

"I want to talk to him," I said. She gave me the phone.

"Hello," I said.

"Hi Mom. How're you feeling?"

"Okay. How's things with you?"

"Good," he said. He chewed on his tongue and I had the sense he was looking at a screen. "How's Dad?"

"Fine."

"He's not having money trouble, is he?" I asked. Miriam looked over her shoulder.

"Not really," Conor said, "more like marriage trouble."

"How so?"

"Denise wants a new car and a vacation and Dad says they can't afford it. They've been at each other."

"Is it because of me?"

"That they can't afford it? I don't know. Maybe."

I wanted to say I felt bad.

"Don't worry about it, though," he added. "I don't think they'll last anyway."

I imagined turning on one of the burners, sticking the corner of Denise's letter through the blue gas flame and watching it curl to nothing.

"I ate your pot," I said.

"It's okay."

I told him I missed him. He said he missed me too but then he had to go.

"Why are you so concerned about Dad's money?" Miriam asked as she opened a can. The muscles in her back were like snakes, surfacing in a flicker, vanishing.

"Am I a bad mother?"

She emptied the can into the stockpot and stirred. I thought maybe she hadn't heard but I

waited. Her back was to me and I thought maybe she needed the privacy of looking away.

"No."

"My son does marijuana."

She shrugged and looked back. "He takes after you."

"I'm serious," I said. "I found it once. I told him I didn't want to see it again. I told him about brain scans I saw on the Internet of kids who smoked pot too early, their brains were sort of rotted. In the front. In the prefrontal cortex is what it's called. And he said okay, I wouldn't see it again and even then, I knew he just meant he'd do a better job of hiding it. I should have said stop. Just stop doing it."

"He will," Miriam said.

"What if he rots his brain? What if it's already bad?"

"It isn't."

"I should have done something," I said. "I should do something."

"He'll stop soon."

"What if he gets stuck? Or into something worse? What do I do? What if he's stuck here, still sleeping in that bedroom," I pointed to the ceiling, "still working construction and he's got tattoos or something and they don't play basketball anymore, they just smoke and talk about how they're going to go out and have a great night but never do, and he can't eat or fall asleep sober and he dry heaves in the morning and says he'll save his money but spends it, and he starts to look either emaciated or obese and develops back problems early from laying brick too young and for too long?"

She stood at the counter, peeling the label off a bottle.

"I think he's coming out of it. But if he isn't, let's not be so serious."

"He thinks Dad and Denise will split."

She nodded. "He wants that. But I don't think it'll happen."

"Why not?"

"Because," she said, dropping to a library voice. "He doesn't want to admit he fucked up." "Conor?"

"Dad. If she doesn't work, everyone will know he fucked up. He'll know."

"Just because they weren't right for each other doesn't mean one of them had to fuck up,

Miriam."

"Who are you talking about?" she said. She put some rice in a bowl and set it in front of me. I tried to eat it.

"Did you bring the pitcher and cups inside from earlier?"

"The guy came to the door with them."

"Which guy?"

"Robbie."

"The white guy?" I said and she nodded. "You know, they never return the cups. I always have to go out there and get them myself." I laughed. First a little, then loud. "What did he say?"

"He said the water at our house was the best he'd ever tasted."

I pressed a grain of rice between my thumb and finger. "And what did you say?"

"That all water tastes the same."

"It doesn't."

"No. It doesn't."

I spent a lot of time in bed. Even when I wasn't sleeping. I watched the door constantly for Miriam. She came to check on me often-- just cracked the door and looked in. Usually she thought I was sleeping. I wanted her to come in but I didn't say so. She'd turn the handle before pulling the door shut so that it made no click. The rest of the day, I would listen to the sound of the basketball hitting the backboard. I could tell when they made their shots, when they missed them, when the ball went straight through the net, when one of them held onto the rim too long, when the ball rotated around it before falling through or off. All by listening.

Miriam sang downstairs. She only did that when she thought no one was around. I thought I'd sneak and listen but I fell asleep without meaning to, without knowing. When I woke up, the light coming through the curtains was blue-tinged silver instead of yellow-hued gold and I knew it must be night. I should have known Miriam wouldn't sing all night. *This could be it*, I thought, *I missed it*.

I rolled away from the window. The sheets resisted because Miriam lay there, wrapped in them. When they're bigger, it's so much harder to gather them up. Not like a compact infant. No, they sprawl on, beyond you.

In the morning, I asked Miriam if we could move the mattress downstairs.

"Sometimes I call and you don't hear me," I said. I knew it wasn't right. I knew she'd wince the way she did and that she'd apologize and offer to set up the baby monitors. I wanted it out of the bedroom.

She stripped the bed and said she'd move the mattress after breakfast. We ate while the sheets were in the wash. I asked for a fried egg but when I punctured the yolk, I gagged.

"Where is all this glitter coming from?" Miriam asked, running her finger over the tabletop.

"Fairies."

She nodded. She might still believe in fairies. I'm not sure. I've always had a sense of what's in Conor's head, but with Miriam, I never know. Her mind is everyone's blind spot. Once, when she was little, she asked if I'd caught her.

"Caught you how?" I said.

"Like in a net." She mimed arcing a butterfly net, then throwing a casting net.

"No," I told her.

"Then where did you find me?"

"You came out of my belly. That's where all babies come from."

"How do they get there?" she asked.

I saw the direction we were headed too late. *Idiot, idiot, idiot*, I thought, repeatedly, like a birdcall.

"The daddy puts them there."

"How?"

I wasn't going to tell her. But the truth seemed so much easier than a lie, and how often does that happen? When does the truth ever seem easier? *How*? she asked. Always. Conor asked *why*?, Miriam *how*? It was as if she already knew the *why*, that the *why* was the same for everything and she already knew.

So I told her. My therapist friend told her kids this stuff. She didn't have euphemisms like *peepee* for private parts. Her kids got in trouble a lot in kindergarten. For middle school, though, I think they were well-equipped. And therapists know. They know what they're doing.

"No," Miriam said, after I'd told her.

"That's how it works."

"But not for me," she said.

"Yes for you."

"No, it's not right."

I did something then but I can't remember. I put a plate down too loud or I closed a drawer too quickly. I didn't hit her.

"It's okay," she said. "But tell me when you remember."

It disturbed me so profoundly that I brought it up during Group, years later. The Group leader said that was an adorable little irrelevant story. But some lady in a turban and wooden earrings approached me afterwards and told me my daughter sounded like an indigo child. I read all about these indigo children. I also read about UFOs and psychics.

Where do indigo children come from? The glitter's come from no place special, only I've hidden it. Miriam's got to come from somewhere else.

We didn't get around to moving the bed until the evening. I wanted to nap while Miriam made dinner.

The mattress was a queen. I swear it used to be lighter. I read that mattresses get heavier, maybe ten pounds heavier, after years of being slept on. From all the dead skin cells that accumulate between the springs and threads. I swear the mattress was lighter-- her father and I didn't have so much trouble moving it, and I know Miriam is stronger. How do you quantify it? Muscles? Measures? Oodles? Miriam is stronger, however you say it. Imagine if all that skin was glitter.

But she couldn't get it out the bedroom door. I couldn't help much and when I tried, she told me to go sit down.

"Should I get someone to help?" I asked.

"Like who?" she said, straining and baring her teeth. "I can do it."

I went downstairs and looked out into the driveway. Boys were finishing their game, putting their shorn shirts back on. The air was as thick with mosquitoes as orange juice is with pulp. Down the street, a father whistled and I smelled fire. Probably someone burning trash. I stepped onto the porch.

"Excuse me." They looked up. "Can one of you help me lift something?"

They looked at each other and the one called Robbie stepped forward.

I led him upstairs at a pace intended to prevent him from seeing much of the house. Miriam had been working on it but it was still bad. Ruffled newspapers lay about my chair, shucked for their puzzles. Stacks of folded laundry cluttered the tabletops, piles of unopened mail among them. The carpet was darker in the high traffic areas and I noticed a fossilized crust of toast beside the couch. And what did it smell like to him? Was he holding his breath?

"We want to move the mattress downstairs," I explained.

"Miriam," I said at the top of the stairs. I was lightheaded, my vision pixelated.

"Go lie down on the couch," she said. "I'll get it."

"Here's help."

She stepped out of the bedroom. *Look*, I wanted to say to the boy, *I may look like one of those hairless cats. But look at her.* 

"I'll get this end," he said. And they got it down the stairs together. The boy almost fell once.

"Where do you want it?" he said, his breath compressed.

"Mom?"

"Here's fine." They dropped it in the middle of the living room, a few feet from my crosswords chair.

Miriam went to get the sheets.

"Thanks," I said. "What's your name?"

"Robbie."

"I'm Ann. Can I get you a beer?"

We went to the kitchen as Miriam stretched the fitted sheet across the mattress.

"Thanks," Robbie said when I got him one. He didn't drink.

"All set," Miriam called from the other room.

"Thanks again," I said. Then I left and got into bed. The sheets were still warm from the dryer and the room was dark.

I'm sleeping on the mattress in the living room.

Miriam cooks, and I see her looking down at me as if I am in the pot, steam rising up around her face and she is closing her eyes and inhaling. Robbie asks if he can stay for dinner.

I'm allowed to sleep all day.

The agreement is that I drink two sips of yellow Gatorade every hour.

When Conor was an infant, I wore him and walked with Miriam through the park where we saw a goose eat a cigarette.

I have to roll over. I don't want to lie on this side anymore. My shoulder feels like it's breaking.

The boys outside swear using words I don't know but they fit in places like eleven down and forty-four across. They even intersect.

Robbie comes around. She won't let him on the roof but he collects and disposes of the sediment she scoops out of the gutters. They go to the nursery and bring home a fig tree. Miriam loves the thing. There is something person-like about it. Its branches look like fingers. She says that figs aren't really fruit but inside-out flowers.

Down. 12. ficus carica. Three letters.

I've sent Conor away because this disease might kill him before it kills me. He puts Fentanyl patches on my back and I pretend not to know what he does for his pain.

8mg Zofran. I don't want to drink but I can't swallow it dry.

Miriam works, sometimes with Robbie's company. She sleeps on the couch beside me and we are like two rafts tethered together. I got rid of her bed years ago and made her room into a storage unit of sorts. I feel bad now. She doesn't sleep in Conor's bed because it's full of crumbs. I changed the sheets after he left but she insists it always feels like crumbs. "Like a shirt you get your hair cut in. It always feels itchy. Even after you wash it."

10 mg Compazine.

I dream that two feet away, Miriam dreams about Robbie.

Miriam runs the vacuum cleaner, trying to get up all the glitter but the machine starts to give off a burning smell and she opens the bottom, expecting tangles of hair. Out fall all the flower headbands.

Whenever Andy called me a bitch, I couldn't help but laugh. What a funny word.

Across. 4. Bad wife. Five letters.

Conor will have a curfew at his father's house. He won't have any friends and so none of them will be trouble.

The children in Miriam's second grade class passed through the doorway-- the boys letting the door slam and the girls holding it for each other. Miriam came through wearing two different shoes. She slid the doorstop in place so it stayed open. She didn't hold it for anyone.

Alternate Zofran and Compazine every three hours.

"Are there things you don't like to talk about?" Miriam asks and Robbie shrugs. They are in the kitchen. Miriam has him cutting onions because she wants to see him cry.

"Golf," he says. "I hate talking about golf. It's the most boring, pointless sport."

"What was your last name?" she asks.

He puts down the knife. "See-- this is the kind of thing I don't like to talk about. I try to forget it."

This has got to be out of order.

It is the first day of a cycle but I don't know which one. I have to go to the clinic.

Does Denise wear those flower headbands to bed? Does Andy find that sexy?

Sometimes, Robbie calls his mother and father *the mother* and *the father*. There have been a number of them. One of the mothers had a collection of sewing machines and bolts and bolts of fabric. She didn't teach him to sew. He learned that in Home Ec. He says he can sew by hand and on a machine.

I can only manage one sip. Miriam's disappointed.

Robbie talks a lot about blood.

Down. 13. Kin. Five letters.

Andy said he liked the rain because it made the cats come inside. This is when we didn't have children. This is when we had cats.

"What are you dressed up for?" Robbie asks. Miriam's come to the door in a dress, the blue dress her father always said was too translucent. It's not that it's translucent, it's the way it lays against her. You can see where her legs start beneath it, you can practically see a dent in the silk where her navel is. But she doesn't know.

"Mass," she says.

People must have whispered about her. But they don't know.

"What's that?" Robbie asks.

"Church."

"Why not just call it church then?"

"It's church for Catholics."

"I think I was a Catholic," he says, stepping inside.

"What do you mean you think you were?"

Robbie has six siblings but he doesn't know them anymore.

"It's probably just something someone told me."

Ativan before bed. Causes drowsiness. May be dissolved beneath tongue.

I didn't send my husband away but I did send my son.

Robbie says he spent eight years in care. Later, Miriam looks up statistics and finds the average child only spends two in the system. Robbie uses words like *respite*, which means that the fathers and the mothers needed breaks from him. Miriam wonders if he's stolen things.

"It's over. I forget about it," he says often.

Down. 29. Hot potato. Six letters.

The nausea meds are just not cutting it. Miriam offers me a brownie but I make her take it away before I smell it.

Why do we tell each other things like, "Guess what song I've had stuck in my head?" Or, "This is disgusting. Try it." Because misery loves company. That is Andy's theory.

Miriam has dreams about Robbie. He's a child, he's trying to fall asleep in a bed that smells different than the last one. He has tricks for getting to sleep. He thinks of good things and then he doesn't have bad dreams. He's learned to deal with the dark. What does he think of? Superhero stuff. He's from another planet. Evidence of this will surface soon, maybe in the morning. Or maybe it hasn't happened yet-- maybe something will bite him tomorrow, maybe he will have a fortuitous accident with a radioactive substance. He will find some matches tomorrow because maybe he can manipulate fire. He will step off a roof because maybe he can fly. He just hasn't tried. He will ask some kids to hit him in the back with a bat. Because maybe it's regeneration that he's got. Maybe he can heal.

She is getting frustrated with me because I won't drink. She says I will get dehydrated and then she will have to take me to the hospital.

Robbie and Miriam have had too much to drink. They think they have enough problems to justify this. Robbie often tries to touch Miriam, tries to brush the backs of his knuckles against her forearm. She doesn't like it.

"I want you," he says. Even as a kid, he knew his superpower didn't involve the manipulation of words. "Not like that," he says.

Miriam believes him. He wants her like he wants a house.

This is starting to hurt more. Has she changed my patch?

Robbie's accepted the fact that he is a member of the human race. He is not from another planet. He has no interesting mutated genes. He has not been blessed with a freak accident. But Miriam still wonders. She puts her ear to the bodies of trees, peers inside underground burrows of mystery origin. Does any of it seem familiar?

I should go to Mass. I haven't been. My marriage is not annulled. Miriam tells Robbie she lit a candle for me. She says she's worried.

Around midsummer, I came back. Miriam had me in the bath. I hadn't been to Group for some time, but I remembered the leader advising us: "return yourself to yourself." I hadn't known what it meant.

Miriam was talking and clipping my fingernails.

"The ceremony is in the fall. Conor doesn't want to go."

"What's that?" I said. Using my voice-- it felt like stretching.

"Hi," she said, grinning.

"Where'd I go?"

She shrugged. "Dad and Denise are renewing their vows. I think it's broken Conor."

"They've only been married two years," I said.

Miriam nodded and motioned for my other hand. "It's telling."

"How's Robbie?" I asked.

She smiled. It dimmed by degrees and she said, "Watch out. It's a trap."

"He seems like a good boy," I said.

"Why do you want things for me that you don't want for Conor?" she asked, standing and pulling a towel off the rack.

"I don't."

She wrapped me in it.

Miriam took me to a few more doctors' appointments before she returned to school in August. *Back under control*, they said. Miriam and Robbie moved my mattress upstairs.

"Conor will be back in a few weeks," she said to me. "Look after this place," she said to Robbie. That was how she said goodbye.

I threw away Denise's headbands. When I asked Conor's friends to move the bin to the curb, one of them knocked it over. The pieces fell onto the road and the younger boys picked them up and put them on their heads. They spun around, trailing ribbons and galloped and neighed like horses. They pulled the flowers apart and threw them at each other like snowballs. I stood barefoot on the porch, watching, unable to go inside.

"Cut it out," Robbie said, slapping a polyester peony from one of their hands. He looked towards the porch, then down, embarrassed, like he'd opened the bathroom door on me. Then he gathered the flowers and broken pieces of plastic combs, dropped them in the trash and wheeled the bin to the curb. He maintained the yard with more zeal than Miriam had asked of him. Really, she'd only asked because she had no other way to say goodbye. But he harvested figs and left them in a bowl on the doormat. He weeded and watered. He mowed the lawn and when it got cold, he brought some of the potted plants to the door. "You should take these ones inside before the frost." When the needles started to drop, he climbed onto the roof and swept them off. Sometimes he sat up there for hours. I wondered if he saw the frogs.

"When's she coming home?" he asked Conor.

"Hopefully never," Conor said. "I hope she moves to another country and sends me Christmas cards that make me think she's really happy."

"I wanna send you Christmas cards that make you think I'm rich," Robbie said. They were in the kitchen. Conor went through my pills.

"You and me," Conor said. "We're staying right here."

It was sleep that I couldn't get. Not in my bed because it seemed too soft, like it might swallow me. What's more, I suffered from a pervasive nausea. I tried to lie down on the dog bed in the bathroom but the toilet or the sink--- I'm not sure which--- made some running sound at irregular intervals and it made me uneasy.

I tried Conor's bed, as he was away for the renewal of the vows. The pillow smelled like the inside of his baseball caps, and Miriam was right about the crumbs.

I went to the kitchen but didn't turn on any lights. I don't know why. I felt superstitious. If I turned on the lights, blaring music might come on with it and I might have a heart attack, the windows might blow to shards, an alarm might sound and summon the police who would think I was a burglar in my own house. I unwrapped a brownie from tinfoil and put it on a plate, set the kettle on the burner and poured a cup of tea. Then I sat at the table by the window and watched the yard, hoping that the sprinklers wouldn't come on because it was quiet out there and maybe some animal would slink by, some animal that made you feel lucky when you saw it, like a fox or a cat.

I ate the brownie with a fork, taking sips of ginger tea between bites. Even so, I could still taste the rubber band flavor of the weed and playing midnight tea party didn't make me feel like less of a loser. But the nausea subsided and I got that sleepy sensation when you turn your head like your brain bobbles a bit. I couldn't remember the last time sleep had felt like anything else.

I went to my chair by the living room window and closed my eyes. There was a noise but I didn't look. More noises -- sometimes the blinds made sounds when it was windy and the windows were open and they knocked against the frames. Then there was a human sound-something muttered-- and I sat up, again my mind went to police but I don't know why. What's so goddamn scary about the police?

Of course, it wasn't police. Just Robbie, bouncing a ball on the concrete, shooting and missing, missing every shot. He had set a bottle of some liquor to the side. Shot, missed, the ball went into the neighbor's yard. Now he would leave. I could sleep when he left.

Instead of leaving, he sat down with his bottle and collected small stones and chips of concrete off the surface of the driveway. He could have been humming. I couldn't hear. I watched him build a small cairn and considered asking him to leave. But maybe he could get me on the roof.

No, that was not appropriate. I would just pretend like I was asleep in my bed with no idea he was out there. It would be like if I caught him facing a tree and taking a piss, I would walk the other direction and not mention it. It would be like if I came to his door and heard him inside singing very loudly just before I knocked, I would pretend I hadn't noticed.

Robbie stood, with difficulty, and went over to the flowerbeds. He inspected them but there was nothing to do-- not a weed to pull, not an insect to crush. He went to the fig tree, with its ring of mulch around the trunk like a Christmas skirt around a fir. Just stood looking at it. It's lobed finger leaves stretching out to him, trying to gather him up. He reached into them and removed a fig, looked at it and then threw it at the house. He pulled off another and pressed it with his shoe until it was nothing but a smear. He pulled off more, stepped on them, ground them to pulp with his heel and the tree shuddered every time he ripped fruit from it.

"Stop," I said and realized I was standing on the porch.

He turned around. Smashed figs glistened like viscera on the ground around him.

"Sorry," he said. He went back to the cairn and the bottle.

"Go home."

But he sat down. Knocked over the neat stack of stones and threw one at an upstairs window. Perhaps he assumed it was Miriam's. It was Conor's.

"Stop it."

He kept throwing them. I went over and kicked the last of them out of his reach. When he looked up at me, I remembered I was bald, bra-less, and high.

"Want some?" he said, holding out the bottle.

"No. Why are you here?"

"For Miriam," he said, saying her name like I did the first time I told her that's what she'd be called.

"She's not here. So you can't see her."

"Oh, I know," he said. "I know." His voice was low and his flush was strange-- like two stripes of red warpaint down the center of his cheeks. "But she said to look after her plants and you and this place, this house."

"Go home," I said again.

He sat there with his legs spread apart, looking at the house. I could have called someone but I didn't think of it. I thought only about Miriam, imagined I hadn't really given birth to her but pulled her out of the heart of a tree or bought her from a hag who promised to reclaim her on some arbitrary birthday. Why? Why wasn't she mine? No-- I wanted her to be gone, doing something besides reanimating boys like Robbie who have gone too long believing there is nothing worth wanting. But he'll call her back with a bit of bait and a bone breaking love to lame her.

"I wish you would get sicker so she'd come home."

The high blunted the effect that was supposed to have on me, I believe.

"If I got too sick, I'd die and then she'd never come back."

He laughed and shook his head, then took a sip of his drink. His mouth made a kiss noise when it came off the bottle. "She might."

"Who do you think you are?"

"No worse than you," he said. "You could die and she'd never come back. But you haven't done it yet."

I knelt next to him. It's not true, I wanted to say, but I let him think it. It's not true. It's not.

#### Animals

Alice thinks it would be nice to vanish. It is unclear when she began to think this way. By vanish, she doesn't mean pack her things, set up again wherever she winds up. She doesn't mean, she tells Desmond, for people to put out posters for her like a lost dog, with all of her distinguishing marks and all the names she answers to. It would be more of a dissolving ordeal, like a submerged tablet of Alka Seltzer. A painless fizzing.

Desmond doesn't like to hear about this disappearing nonsense that somehow resembles carbonation-- or how did she put it? He used to think it was clever. Cruel, but smart. Now she's told him too many times, or else he's thought it over too many times. Sometimes, he holds against her what she does to him in dreams.

They lost a dog to disappearance. That's probably why she distinguishes between vanishing done by dogs and vanishing done by girls of her type. They assume the dog left home to die.

"Disappear however you want. We didn't put up signs for Frey. You could do it that way," he's said at least once before.

Alice swallows it with the grit at the bottom of her mug that she holds on a Sunday morning in February. She's still wearing the clothes she slept in, holiday pajama pants she didn't put away after Christmas and some yellowed shirt. She used to wear Desmond's shirts and no pants, as she was supposed to. Maybe she did that during an October-- what an October way to behave, some October revolutions earlier-- what dog had they had then?

"Don't we mark the eras of our lives based on the dogs we keep?"

"What?" Desmond says. "Yes."

"The era of Frey."

"A golden one."

"And sad."

It is now the era of Ursa, the dog who sleeps under Alice's chair. She is Desmond's sign and Alice's pattern of stars, Desmond's zodiac and Alice's animal.

Alice counted the synonyms for *I love you* in her head while her academic advisor, Dr. Thomas Blake, went on and on about Carmen Jones.

*I worry about you.* 

I pray for you.

At their previous meeting, Alice had expressed her need for work. Blake called her back in, saying he had something in mind.

I let you bother me.

Dr. Carmen Jones was a botanist, he explained, a friend and former colleague who needed an assistant.

### I make exceptions for you.

Blake had a picture of his wife on his desk and also some of his children. Alice didn't know any of their names. Blake was going bald, had gotten somewhat fat so that his finger swelled around his wedding ring. He spoke about Carmen Jones as if things had been left undone.

#### I miss you.

The entire meeting had been his synonym.

"She needs help getting her office organized, arranging her schedule. She says she's getting old and can't keep track of things. But she was always like that," he said. Alice wondered if his teeth were real.

"Sure."

"You'll like her." Blake removed his glasses. "She used to like her bed made before she got into it. I don't know anymore. That's not the sort of thing you'd do for her. Never mind."

He stopped there and thought. Alice felt she should say something, thought about nature abhorring vacuums the way conversations abhor silences. She resisted and the vacuum pulled words out of him.

"She will eat all the way around a hamburger and give the best bite, the last one in the middle, she'd always give it to-- away. She'd always give it away."

Alice had been seeing someone new, a boy named Desmond who wrote poetry. Probably as a poet, these were the types of things he should notice but Alice doubted he observed the way she ate hamburgers.

"Ask her to tell you a story."

"A story?" Alice said.

"Yes, like a bedtime story. She's good at those."

"All right."

Blake looked at his folded hands and then back at Alice with a bitterness that surprised

her.

"I don't know why she's looking for someone now," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know why now."

Alice found a reason to leave. There was something disgusting about Blake, something about his family photographs and his refusal to give up on a woman who hadn't loved him, but when Alice met Carmen, she understood. Carmen, with the body of a child and pumpkins on her porch, nose straight as an arrow and the loud laugh. She grew vegetables chefs fell in near-erotic love with; they named dishes after her and she brought Alice to eat at restaurants with only twelve seats but complained about the small portion sizes, complained about eating art, how thin you'd get on art. Then they'd buy beer and nachos on their drives home from dinners, sit in the truck bed in their nice clothes, shivering and staring at their toes in tights. Carmen would say either your tongue was bored or your belly was empty.

"How well do you know Dr. Blake?" Alice asked upon meeting her.

"A long time. I knew him when he still had hair."

Alice tried to picture this but could only come up with an image of Blake in a powdered wig. She laughed but then thought maybe it wasn't funny; maybe Blake had been beautiful with hair.

"He said you were good at telling stories."

"Do you believe the things he tells himself?" Carmen said.

Alice wished she hadn't asked about it. "I don't know him that well."

"I only ever told him one story."

*Over and over*, Alice thought, because she knew, because the boy Desmond asked her the same questions, craved the same answers and strung together, they'd started to sound like a story she knew by the pictures. Someone could have been reading it to her wrong the whole time.

Alice didn't make Carmen's bed but she went through her papers and found the things she lost. She drove her to farms and watched Carmen turn over leaves; she put her books on shelves and labeled packets of seeds. She asked Carmen questions.

"How come you never married?"

She shrugged. They were having coffee, looking out the window at the garden. Carmen sketched asparagus. "I didn't want to."

"Why not?"

"I didn't know anyone I wanted to marry."

"What about Dr. Blake?"

Carmen laughed. "What about him?"

Alice waited.

"I don't know if he still does it but he used to yawn with his mouth open and it drove me crazy."

"That's why?"

Green colored pencils rolled off the table.

"Could be."

"That's silly," Alice said, but she wished she could discard people on such a basis. All the people, all but Carmen, needed each other too badly. Too hungry. She'd thought it was impossible, but here was Carmen, eating art. She reminded Alice of some pagan idol, some Artemis. She was ashamed, because there had been temples for Artemis and priestesses too, probably girls just like her.

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Desmond kisses Alice's hand. Eyes closed, like holding a piece of fruit to his mouth and nose to feel how ripe. That is the only thing he does that makes her pulse pick up but it must be a misconception that everything he does should give her butterflies. No-- if she were to cough up insects from inside her, they wouldn't be crumpled butterflies, shiny with spit like straight from the chrysalis. Alice thinks of being stepped on, of opening her mouth and letting forth silent streams of ants. She is not filled with anything that vibrates or buzzes or flutters.

Alice convinced herself that she did in fact want to spend more time in school. Or perhaps Desmond did that. *I know what you want*, he said, *you want the white picket fence and the two and a half kids, the Prince Charming husband, and soccer games. Think of us*, he said, *both of us teaching*. Alice said she did want a Prince Charming-- one who would rescue her from the ivory tower, and as she made the joke, wondered why she couldn't say anything true without also making it funny. He laughed. Told her again what she wanted until she agreed because they were good things to want. Even so, he keeps telling her. But when he speaks of teaching, a craving for mountains wrings her. When he isolates the white picket fence from any conceivable home in much the same way that he scrutinizes disembodied female breasts or mouths, Alice says she wants a place to settle that is more than a familiar set of problems. But *what a paradox*, she thinks, *what a utopia, I should just teach*. She moves out of a dorm and into an apartment with him. Frey runs away, so it is just the two of them.

Of course, Desmond thrives in graduate school. Alice swears he is a mushroom, he grows in the shittiest places, in the dark, harboring poison perhaps. He drinks more, sleeps less, eats less, writes more. He's begun to smell like his cigarettes, he's begun to publish. Success pools around his feet faster the more he comes apart; he likes chainsmoking and consuming pots of coffee on an empty stomach, working so late into the night that he gets lost in it, the way stupid dogs get lost under blankets. He wakes Alice with his heavy pacing. *Come to bed*, she says to stop the shuffling, so he takes a break from poetry to fuck, then gets back to it.

Desmond buys Alice a coat of dark green wool. She begins to spend more time outside with it, even tries to drag Desmond to places where the river is frozen or the trees are good to climb but he can't walk without wheezing and nothing is good enough for a poem. She makes tiny teepees of kindling, good homes for fire, though it always outgrows and devours them. There is ash beneath her fingernails and a woolly worm by his shoe-- *you can tell how long the winter will last by the proportions of black hairs to brown*, she says, snapping sticks of cedar to show him the sanguine heartwood. Her plain breath is as opaque as his Marlboro exhale and Alice thinks even she could write a poem about that. But Desmond says he can't think because he can't get warm. Also, they are beginning to smell like completely different types of smoke.

Carmen has begun to act strange. She yells at Alice for moving her papers from the table to the desk, saying she doesn't want them there, Alice should know better. She laces up her boot and can't find the other one.

"Alice, where's my other... What the fuck is it called?"

Alice pulls the boot out from under the couch and they laugh. *What the fuck is it called?* they start to say for everything. Cups. Trees. Funny feelings.

Carmen speaks often of Tommy, says the ocean made Tommy itch and Tommy never liked television programs like this, Tommy couldn't cook but he could stand on his hands for a record of eleven seconds. It takes Alice a day and a half to realize that Tommy is only Dr. Blake.

Here's a problem, Alice gets around to admitting, but what the fuck is it called?

"How many children do I have?" Carmen asks, waving at Alice with one hand while pressing the other against the telephone mouthpiece.

"What?" Alice says, looking up from the sink where she rinses mismatched plates and silver.

"How many?"

"Who is that?" Alice asks, drying her hands.

"One second please," Carmen says into the phone and then to Alice, "I can't remember how many. Just tell me this time; I won't forget next time, I swear."

"Hang up the phone," Alice says.

"He's going to help me set up my will. I've been meaning to do it but I keep forgetting."

"Hang up," Alice says, reaching for the phone. Carmen moves away.

"I'll help you set up your will, Carmen, but we're not doing it over the phone with some crook. Give it here." Alice catches the phone by the antennae and disconnects.

"Now why couldn't you just tell me?" Carmen says. Her voice, as of late, has taken on an irritable tone, the way sleepwalkers speak when you try to reason with them.

"It was a scam," Alice says, "People don't call you and offer to draft your will over the phone."

"How many children do I have?" Carmen says, standing from her rocking chair. "Sit--"

Carmen lurches and slaps Alice on the cheek, softly, like brushing off an insect. "None. You have no children." Carmen does not accept this answer. She spends the rest of the day in her bedroom, trying to call to mind people who never existed, though she feels them. When she thinks Alice has gone home for the night, she cries.

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Alice stops trying to bring Desmond to mountains, the hardware store, the grocery store. He doesn't like doing things with his hands but he gives her money sometimes and says she shouldn't go places alone, maybe she should get a dog. He has not wanted another dog since Frey, because it left him. Perhaps Desmond is afraid she will get lonely and leave him. Lonely she is-- lonelier than a goddamned beta fish, in fact-- but leave him? No-- he always kisses her hand at the right time and she will wait. For him to eat enough again, she'll wait for that. For this cigarettes and black coffee phase to pass. Waiting for Desmond is like waiting for the sun to die-- a certain thing a long way off-- but she'll do it. She says they can go to the pound but he wants something purebred.

The new dog's name is Ursa. A wolfhound and at 120 pounds, the breeders say she is probably done growing. In some ways, she looks like Desmond-- hunched, ragged, sensitive in her features, but with no time for it. They probably weigh about the same too. Ursa follows Alice, doesn't pull, returns with a whistle, and Alice insists she loves Desmond. He likes to be read to, so she does that, and cuts his hair when it gets too long in the back. Flowers, she brings him flowers, because he writes a verse about the dog asleep on her feet in the morning, and he doesn't use his hands for much more than a pen but they are beautiful still, brown with green veins, half-moons on every nail. One of the tendons forms a hollow by his wrist the exact size of her thumb and Alice thinks not so many couples fit together anywhere but the hips. She and Desmond must be a correct match, or else very lucky, and either would be a good thing. The next fall, Desmond publishes his first book and his parents cut him off. He put secrets on paper, printed and bound vulnerable truths-- beautiful, delicate things meant to die--like pressed flowers: his parents, how they loved and spoiled him, left him places, pushed him down stairs, charmed and re-charmed him, snapped, fought, drank, apologized, sang such good songs. It shouldn't have bothered them; it was material. But now he looks at his mouth in the mirror and finds black spots in the centers of his back teeth. He asks Alice what to do and she says material doesn't fill cavities, dentists do. He says someone should pay for it, thinks doctors should do pro bono work, asks about welfare. Alice says it doesn't work like that. So he thinks he'd retract a couple things, skim or tell some lies-- but only enough to fill as many holes.

Desmond misses Alice. She's taken up more hours with Carmen, who seems to deteriorate the more he and Alice need the money. But as if mental illness were communicable, Alice seems to be sinking, by degrees, into some comfortable catatonia. She shuts and opens the refrigerator repeatedly, as if the condiments might somehow breed and multiply in the time it takes to close and reopen the door. Yet she has no appetite for the leftovers he brings from staff luncheons and catered meetings. He feeds the turkey sandwiches and pasta salad to the dog after Alice goes to bed. When he himself is ready for sleep, after hours of grading and writing, he finds the dog on his side of the bed, Alice's arms around it. At least, he thinks, Ursa was his idea. *Look, she loves the thing I gave her*. He nudges the dog, Alice rolls over. When he reaches for her hand, he finds it is rough as dry reef and she takes it away. When he reaches for more, she lies beneath him, vacant and still as the surface of the moon.

"Say something," he says.

She prefers instead to believe that a little bit of silence is a decent piece of power. Things crawl and bite in the bed. Somewhere, the dog has picked up fleas. Carmen draws the indoor aloe plant because the fog makes it impossible to see the plants outside. She draws the mother aloe like a writhing kraken and beside it, all its sprouted babies, its pups, as they're called. They do not look like pups. They do not look mammalian in the slightest but Carmen draws their curves and spines with such tenderness, finding mother-love for even the most alien of brainless, nerveless things.

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"How many children do I have?"

"Just one," Alice says. A daughter, she says, allergic to pineapple, with a fondness for books about outer space.

When they moved, Desmond broke the Uhaul mirror off on a beam in the parking garage and then put the couch down on his foot, breaking it. His foot, not the couch. So they had not been able to move out of their dorms and into the new apartment in one day, even though they were only relocating across the street to attend graduate school at the same university. They spent the afternoon and evening in the emergency room. Desmond chose a purple cast.

On the way back from the hospital, Alice ran into the gas station for beer and helped him out of the car when they got home, jamming the crutches into his armpits. "Go sit down." She helped him through the front door, then set the beer on the floor. "I'm going to take Frey out." The dog sat while she hooked the leash onto his choke chain, his tail waving over the floor like a massive whip or windshield wiper.

The couch was still on its side. Desmond opened two beers on the leg, where any chips from the caps wouldn't show. He left his crutches and stepped outside.

"Where are you?"

"Go back in," Alice said. "You'll break your other foot."

"Here," he said, holding one bottle out in front of him as he descended the front steps.

She ran to catch him, though it wasn't certain he would fall.

"Thanks," she said, taking the beer. "Cheers." They touched bottles.

"Where's Frey?" he asked. She pointed to a curved white shape in the yard. It was mostly still, though it shook a little. "Dogs look awful while they're shitting. Do you think we look that bad?"

"Probably," Alice said. She had to laugh. "Maybe not, though. It's just sitting."

"Shitting?"

"Sitting."

"I know," he said, looking down at her. Her face wasn't raised so he could see only the part in her hair, a seismic bolt of scalp. "I heard you."

"Sometimes squatting," she said and then looked up. *The moon must be behind me*, he thought, *from the way she's looking, the moon must be behind my head*. He must have looked like an icon, a saint with a flat disc of a halo.

The mattress was still in the Uhaul, so they flipped it off its side and settled under their coats. Desmond wanted to close the door so the dog wouldn't run out and also because it was not dark enough but Alice was afraid they would suffocate. She drew a seahorse on his cast and when he wanted to sleep, she covered his eyes with her hand.

Ursa dies in the space of a day, though Alice suspects it started awhile ago. Before she's dead, she's dying; before she's dying, she's shitting worms and before that she's not eating and before that she's got fleas and before that, something else. Alice can't keep track of the parasites.

When Alice tries to leave for work, Ursa doesn't get up from her place where she sits in the kitchen. When Alice calls, it seems to pain the dog to disobey but she stays where she is, sitting upright, stuck. Had she slept at all or sat like that all night? Alice can't remember feeling her in the bed. She puts water on the floor and goes to work.

When she comes home, she finds Desmond at his desk in the bedroom, typing. Ursa is as she'd been.

"Has she moved at all?" Alice asks and Desmond doesn't know. "I think she's sick."

Desmond fits his fingers together behind his neck. "Well, we don't have money for the vet."

"I know that. I wasn't asking."

He sighs and goes back to work.

"Can I use the computer?" she asks.

He closes the document and gets out of his chair. It rolls backwards across the room until it collides with the bed. Alice hears the front door open and close.

All the advice on the Internet consists of taking the pet to the vet if the ailment seems serious. Alice goes back to the kitchen.

Ursa's eyes are yellow and her nose is dry. She stares ahead, front legs quivering from hours in the same position. "Lie down," Alice says but she won't. *Lie down, don't you suffer?* Alice gets on her side and tries to coax the dog to the floor. No change. Alice falls asleep.

She wakes when Desmond returns.

"Where were you?"

He takes his hand out of his pocket, a joint pressed between his fingers.

"I feel sick." He opens the window and stands by it, can't get a flame on his lighter because his hands shake. Alice gets up and helps him.

"What's wrong with her?" he asks, blowing out his nose.

"I don't know."

"You didn't figure it out."

"No."

He coughs. "Want any?"

Alice shakes her head. She kneels in front of Ursa, dips her knuckles in the water bowl and runs them over the dog's nose.

"Christ, what's wrong with her?"

"She's dying," Alice snaps. Now he will ask, "can't you do anything?" Now he will go brew coffee or otherwise occupy himself.

"Alice," he says, staring at the space in front of him with eyes locked open and watering. "Let's go to bed."

And she does.

In the morning, the dog is dead. Alice buries the body in the backyard before Desmond wakes and asks her why she didn't think about the landlord and the lawn. He sits up in bed, watching as she opens dresser drawers, a towel wrapped around her.

"Where are you going?"

"We didn't even stay up with her."

"What?" Desmond asks, pulling the sheet off his legs. "Where are you going?"

"Carmen's."

"Why? It's not your day."

"I want to."

He steps into his pants, molted the night before, and pulls them back on. As she buttons her shirt, he puts his hands on her.

"I know you're upset about the dog. But we have each other."

"We don't need each other."

Desmond lets go. "Of course we do. Everyone needs someone."

"Carmen doesn't."

"Is it because of her that you're so hell-bent on being alone? You're going to end up an old maid same as her if you keep up like this."

"Fine."

"Fine? You've completely romanticized it. She's lonely-- you know it. It comes out the more she loses her mind."

Alice laces her boots and leaves. She walks to Carmen's and finds her sitting at the table, counting seeds and putting them in envelopes.

"My dog died."

"No," Carmen says, drawing out the vowel. She stands and pushes Alice's hair behind her ears.

"It's just a dog. I shouldn't feel this way."

"We have those dogs."

Alice sits and touches her cheek to the windowpane. "Who was yours?"

"Shasta. Like the soda. She'd look up whenever the commercial played on TV."

"What breed?"

"A malamute. Already a year old when we got her."

"We?"

"Me and Tommy."

"You and Dr. Blake had a dog?"

"Yes. We'd take her camping-- she and I slept in the double sleeping bag and Tommy in the other one." Carmen laughs and looks through the window at the garden. "Birds are eating the blueberries and rabbits are getting at the greens."

"What was Dr. Blake like when he was young?"

"Different," Carmen says, uncapping a pen to label her envelopes. "I want to put up some netting and a fence, maybe."

"Different how?"

"He wasn't that different. He was the same."

"What did he look like?" Alice asks.

"Get me the photo album, I'll show you."

Alice goes to the bookshelf in the living room and returns with the album. Carmen sets it on top of the seeds and looks through the pages.

"Where is it?"

"Where is what?" Alice asks.

"The wedding photo."

"What wedding photo?"

Carmen looks at her with sleepwalker's agitation. "*My* wedding photo. Mine and Tommy's."

"Oh," Alice says and takes the album. "I don't know." She puts the book back in its place on the shelf. Alice thinks it would be nice to vanish. "Now I want it. Where did you put it?"

A rabbit in the garden disappears between orbs of cabbage.

"I don't know."

Carmen gets up from the table and pulls open the kitchen cabinets. When the contents of all the drawers and cabinets are exposed, she moves to the living room, opening more drawers, making noise and knocking books off shelves.

"Where is it?" she asks and begins to cry.

There is a sensation like a hole in the back of Alice's head. She could put her hand through it. It gets bigger. She reaches into her pocket and removes her wallet. Inside, there is a picture of her and Desmond, sitting on the balcony of their then-new apartment. Alice had set the camera on a timer. Desmond sat in a chair, the leg with the cast stretched out in front of him, Alice behind him with her arms around his neck. They couldn't find Frey for the picture. "Did it take it?" Desmond is saying as the flash goes off. Alice smiles to her eyes.

"Is this it?" She brings the photograph to Carmen, who takes too long to examine it. "Yes," she says. "Yes. Where did you find this?"

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Carmen holds it and waits.

Days later, Desmond comes looking for Alice. He comes to Carmen's house. Alice is there, he figures, staying away because she's mad about the dog. Won't she feel guilty when he explains to her about the vet-- that he called when Alice was at work and asked if he could arrange something. They offered a credit card but he didn't pass the credit check. Sorry, they said. We're not the only ones, Desmond would say to Alice, who let animals die. Desmond has caught Carmen on a good day. She answers the door fully dressed, though no one-- not Alice, not the nurse-- is there to help her. As Desmond walks through the hall and into the kitchen, he observes notes taped to the walls, reminders in Alice's handwriting, explaining how to do the most basic things. Faucet on, rinse hands, soap, lather, rinse, faucet off, dry hands. Lock door. They are meant to orient Carmen but they only disorient Desmond. He wishes (he doesn't know why) that Alice had labeled everything in their house the same way. Labeled the pantry and the refrigerator so that he might know what she'd eat. Labeled the windows so he'd know what she looked at. Labels on their clothes, the bed, and her brain-- paper on her body so he'd know when to kiss that hand. If she'd been a writer, he might have figured her out.

"Is Alice here?" Desmond asks.

Carmen reads, leaning against the kitchen counter. She wears black frame glasses and doesn't look fragile in the slightest, though she is under a hundred pounds now. It is because she can be so still, Desmond thinks. She has no tremor.

"I don't know," she says.

"Was she here?"

"Yes."

"Is she here now?" Desmond asks. "Where is Alice?"

Carmen looks up from her page.

"I don't know."

Yes you do, he thinks. You're hiding her-- in the root cellar, some annex, in the walls, some secret place. Desmond can feel her here, the way he can feel her get into bed when he is already asleep. She is looking at him. She is holding her breath.

"Are you worried?" Desmond asks.

Carmen shakes her head.

"I'm worried," he says.

"Different matter," Carmen says. "Same material."

"What?"

"Of the two of us," she says, "you'll survive." To him, she looks quite sane.

Desmond is trying to write a poem about Alice's disappearance but he can't remember how she did it. He can only conjure images of carbonation, bubbles, and this doesn't make sense. He tries making her fade out like a double exposure, into woods or waves but hates it. She ran away, he writes, jumped out of the truck while we were sleeping and we didn't put up signs for her. She died in the night, while we were sleeping and we didn't stay up with her. No, none of it's right. He studies the way smoke dissipates, how puddles evaporate, echoes vanish and memory goes missing. People in the distance disappear by shrinking as you and they move farther apart. He gives these little drills titles, breaks up their lines, collects them, publishes them, but he can't get it right.

## Blood of the Air

We're not supposed to exchange names because we're not supposed to be able to find each other.

I thought for a while about where to start. Maybe college. I liked college. I was an English major. And I did theatre. I wrote my own monologues and performed them onstage, in costume and makeup under lights like heat lamps. I miss applause.

No, let's start with her. We were in college when I saw her for the first time. Ha. How many love stories start like that? I saw her buying coffee at midnight before going into the library. She was similar to my last girl. Maybe that's what got me looking. But I liked how this one wriggled her nose every few minutes like it was itchy. And she bit her lip. That's how I knew she was watching me too. No one bites their lip in private. It's done for show.

I couldn't manage to introduce myself that first night. The last girl had gotten in my head. When we parted, she'd said some harsh things about my character. I can't even remember them now.

I went back to the library some days later and saw that girl there. She was there often, looking through microfiche or reading. Always used too many sheets of carbon paper when typing, had to hammer down on the keyboard to get what must have been a mere ghost of a copy on the last page.

At the time, I was the type to invite girls over for movies. The type to keep the thermostat cold so we had to get under the same blanket. But there was something about this girl that made me want to make an impression. A bravo introduction. Bravo, not hello. So one night, when she got up to leave, I stood up too. She walked fast, even while buttoning her coat as she pushed through the doors.

It was windy outside. I held my hand over my hair so it wouldn't blow out of place. I can't remember what time it was exactly. Late, because no one was around. She stopped at the payphone and looked through her pocket for change, chin tucked into her collar in this childlike way, cheeks and nose red. I approached as she slid a quarter into the slot. It was funny because she did it wearing mittens.

"Excuse me," I said.

Then she turned and I hit her.

Do you know what it feels like to hit someone? Right in the eye, where it's soft. You still get some bones but the eye itself is good to your knuckles. Bravo.

It was nice not having to be subtle, for once. No fussing with the thermostat and the blanket, no worrying about getting the drinks mixed up. No chance of the girl going along and spoiling the whole ordeal. (That was always a disappointment. Also kind of slutty, I didn't like it.) I thought I liked it when they squirmed but I soon realized what I'd been missing. Because she fought like hell. And the difference between a bit of squirming and the efforts this one put forth? Like the difference between sugar and uppers.

I could tell she was a virgin. Which was pleasant and also irritating. Let me explain: you tell a virgin to do something and-- if you've done things properly up to this point-- fear compels her. She'll do whatever you tell her. She wants to do it. But she doesn't know how. It's beyond frustrating. Here is the flushed little angel in the white underwear (I swear this one wore white underwear) and here is the utter privacy of nighttime in the winter. Here is a near fantasy. If only she had an iota of skill. So you do more of the posturing-- hitting, pinching, biting, whatever--but when she's taken a reasonable beating and she's still claiming ignorance, then you start to believe it.

In a way, it was my first time too. I've always been somewhat sensitive and as much of a spiritual awakening as it was, I felt conflicted. I was the deviant in the woods or the highway rest stop. I was pervert whose picture appeared on the news. My mother used to tell me she'd protect me from men like the one I'd become.

When it was over, I cried. The girl was polite. I apologized profusely and she told me it was okay.

"I'm not a bad person," I said.

"I know. I know you're not a bad person."

Before I let her get dressed, I made her put her hands over her eyes and count down from a hundred. *Ready or not, here I come*, I wanted her to say at zero. She counted down steadily and I stayed through ninety, stayed through eighty when her voice waned, seventy, sixty-five, sixty and it cracked. There. A shaky fifty-nine and a sob-warped fifty-eight. I should have made her count down from a thousand. I wanted to listen to her count down from a million. But thirty and twenty and ten went by. Ready or not, there I go.

Scott blinds mice for a living. It is Valentine's Day. On his way into work, he buys two eclairs at Stella's and the woman asks him, "One for you and one for your valentine?"

"One for me and one for me," he says.

At the lab, Scott puts mice in a box and shines bright light in it for about four hours. This bothers Phoebe.

"Why do you do that?" she says, picking at an eclair Scott can't finish alone. He sits at his desk, reading the paper while he waits for the mice to go blind. "I thought you just gave them puzzles. Or put them in mazes."

"It's a model of blindness we use in our lab on a daily basis."

"You don't do this every day," Phoebe says. She knows this because she is here every day, between or after classes. She likes to read at Scott's desk, in the office he shares with three other researchers. Though still in school, Phoebe spends more time in this university lab than she does in the library. Here, with Scott, who is no longer a student.

"Every few weeks."

"You said you use them daily."

"We do. But we blind them in batches."

Phoebe picks crumbs off the papers on Scott's desk with her finger. "I feel like that is not good for you. On farms, they don't slaughter every day. And they rotate responsibility."

"I just said I don't do it every day," Scott says, putting down the newspaper. He opens his laptop and checks his graphs. "They're not even in pain. If you were around it more, it wouldn't bother you."

"I'm sure," Phoebe says. Then, "If you put a person in a box and shined really bright light on him for four hours, would he go blind?"

"He would probably just cover up his eyes."

"Oh." She puts the pastry down. "But mice can't do that."

"Sometimes they huddle in the corner and close their eyes. But that doesn't happen often," Scott says and looks up from the computer screen. Phoebe sits with her hands in her lap, staring at nothing and looking mournful.

"Does it help to be in the corner?"

"They'll still go blind. But they're not in any real distress. Mostly, they just walk around and dig up the bedding and eat the food. They don't know they're going blind." "How can they not be in distress? I killed a fish one time by turning its light on and off." "I highly doubt it was because of the light."

"It was. It was my fault."

"There's no sort of biological pathway that would cause that to happen."

"You weren't there. Maybe I gave him a heart attack. Maybe he had epilepsy," Phoebe says, looking away. "Epileptic neon tetra. The poor thing."

"Good god," Scott says, reopening his newspaper. "Don't come on the days we kill them." "How big is a mouse's heart?" Phoebe asks.

Scott leans forward in his chair and holds up his hand. He makes a ring with his thumb and finger the size of a mouse's heart. "They beat very fast. They hum."

It wasn't because of her that I wound up in here. It was later, some time after I'd graduated. Another girl pressed charges. Others had tried but they usually weren't able to pick me out of a lineup. Or there was no evidence. Or they just fell apart and dropped charges. It was the blond bitch. I shouldn't have done a blond. I'm not usually superstitious but I think this is the exception.

My friends stopped visiting after the first three months. My parents never came, though my mother writes me. She asks what she did or didn't do. She tells me she re-watches home videos, looking to see if I make eye contact or understand intonation. She thinks it was the medication she took when she was pregnant, or the fact that she and my father fought when I was young. She wonders if my father's boss molested me.

I used to burn things. I should tell you about Vincent. I want to tell you about Vincent. We were in second grade together. I went to his birthday party, which was in his backyard. We ate hotdogs and his mother taught us how to gleek-- something I thought women were just incapable of doing. I was quite enamored with her. She wasn't like my mother. She was beautiful, with big white American teeth, and she wasn't fat. I asked her how old she was and she laughed.

Later that year, Vincent missed a lot of school and our teacher told us his mother had died. When he came back, I asked him what happened. "She killed herself," he said, with a flatness of affect, as if he were merely explaining her job. I had to go into the bathroom to cry.

How could she do that? I thought. I made her laugh, didn't I? We weren't even allowed to watch movies about suicide because it was deemed inappropriate. Did she not think of that?

I'd never understood why my mother got so gloomy when she passed funeral processions. "We're just going about our day, everything is normal," she'd say. "But for someone else, it's the worst day of their life." Now I understood. Around me, everyone went about their business, the teacher taught us fractions, completely unaware and uncaring of the fact that this was the worst day in my life.

In science class, we took magnifying glasses and bug boxes onto the playground and looked for ants. I held my lens at an angle that caught the sunlight and a line of smoke rose up from the ground. Vincent's mother, I thought of Vincent's mother as I held the glass there, even though I knew better.

It didn't make sense to me that the woman would kill herself after the party. The party was perfect. The lawn was green and there were balloons and deviled eggs and potato salad and she was nowhere near death in that yellow sundress. What had changed? But I realized it was the day she met me. That was what had happened.

I began to notice bad things followed me. Every time I turned on the news, some catastrophe had taken place. Tsunamis, shooters, amber alerts. Every time I got in the car, we passed some horrific accident. Cars, crumpled like foil, surrounded by road flares. Every time I had a pet, it died. I was a bad omen.

Burning things helped. I don't know why I switched to girls. I tried to content myself with fire, but I wanted to ruin bigger things. Do you understand me? People pretend they don't. But it's like a field of untouched snow. It's the feeling of running all through it.

I'd been here for around a decade when I got my first visitor. It was the virgin from the library. Of course, no longer a virgin.

She looked old.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" I said. Probably because she looked so old, she didn't seem scared. Even that bold blond bitch who sat on a witness stand and pointed her nasty finger at me looked scared.

"I'm only here for one reason," she said.

"Yes?" This excited me. You hear about insecure sluts with very low IQs falling in love with prison inmates all the time. I was so deeply bored.

Even before she spoke I could tell she had rehearsed it. "You are the biological father of my child, who is ill. I would like to see if you are a potential match for an organ donation."

This was unexpected. I would have thought she was playing but

"What's his name? Or is it a she?" I asked. "How old? Fourteen? When were you? I can't remember."

"Will you agree to participate in the test?"

Sure, why not?

Looking back, I should have dragged that out. Perhaps I didn't realize how desperate she was, or else I was made too impulsive by the news. I think in that instant, I would have given my heart, my eyes for that kid, the only bit of me outside this place.

I was a match. She came back to ask the real question.

"Would you be willing to donate a kidney?" Her face barely moved when she spoke. I found it unsettling.

"I've been wanting to tell you," I said, "for a long time now," (pause), "that I am truly sorry for what I did to you."

She merely continued on as if she hadn't heard me. "My child is in renal failure and has been on dialysis for several years. If you choose to donate, my child will not require dialysis any more. You will still be able to function normally with one kidney."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said and I really did sound sorry. "Is dialysis expensive? Too long a donor wait list? Is that why you're coming to me now?"

She rested her hands on the table and looked at me.

"I have to admit I'm surprised you didn't bring a lawyer. I gather money is tight."

She wore no wedding band.

"I can't imagine what it must be like, raising a sick child alone. And if you're coming to me that must mean you yourself are not a match. I know, as a parent, you want to provide your child with everything, especially the means of survival."

I was pushing quite hard but she was immoveable.

"What does our child know about me?" I asked.

"My child," she said. "We are talking about my child." A bit of aversion passed through her face.

"You didn't make it alone. As I recall, you were rather passive during the whole ordeal. I did all the work."

"If you need time to decide, I can come back later." Her features settled back into a neutral expression.

"Oh, I've decided," I said. I sounded angrier than I should have. I sounded like I was losing. "I'll do it. But I'd like you to do something for me."

Scott spends most of his evenings on the patio of his ground floor apartment, crumpling bottle caps in half and throwing them into the fire pit. He tries not to think.

When Scott tries not to think, he thinks of Phoebe. He thinks of her looking at him, asking, "Do I have something in my eye?" He thinks of her trying to use chopsticks. Standing on tiptoes, talking to her mother on the phone. He thinks of her gray sweater she has cut through the collar so it doesn't choke her. He thinks of how he finds her hairs sometimes on the back of his chair.

He reaches for another block of wood as a car turns the corner. He can hear it but the headlights aren't on. It parks in front of his building and it's Phoebe. She steps out and calls to him.

"Do you have pliers?"

Scott watches her change a fuse. She yanks it out like a bad tooth, then rubs her eye and smears her forehead with grease. When she's finished testing the lights, she helps herself to a beer and places a quartered log on the fire.

"I've got stuff to make soup in the car," she says. "You want soup?"

"A box without hinges, key or lid. Yet golden treasure inside is hid. What am I?" Phoebe says. She's already chopped the onions. They hiss in their bath of oil.

Scott cracks an egg into a bowl. "You're not the only one who's read books."

"Fine," she says. "Why is a raven like a writer's desk? Have you heard that one?"

"You have something on your forehead," Scott says. Phoebe struggles to remove the seal

from a jar of bay leaves. She wipes the back of her hand against her temple.

"Other side," he says.

She rubs the other side but only smudges the grease further. "Have you heard it before?"

"I don't know. What's the answer?"

"Not telling. You have to try harder," she says. "Your turn. Something tricky."

"It's still there."

She wipes at her face again. "Is it gone?" she asks, still working the seal.

"You just made it worse."

"Can you get it?" She looks up at him and she's close-- all he'd have to do is raise his hand and run his thumb over the mark.

"No. Go look in the mirror," he says.

She gives him a look and walks to the bathroom. What is that look? It is like pain. The jar of bay leaves rests unopened on the counter. Scott picks it up and peels off the seal, then sets it back.

"I've got one for you," he says when she returns. "Two in you and three in me." "Did you do this?" she asks, taking the leaves in her hand. "What's your guess?"

"Did you open this?" she asks again, holding up the jar. Her tone is urgent and she watches him.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Scott feels his shoulders come up. "I don't know. You were trying to open it."

"Yes, but," Phoebe says and looks away. She looked this same way over the mice.

"What?" Scott says. "What's the matter?"

"Here," she says, handing him the leaves. "I don't understand. I don't understand you."

She turns and shuts off the burners. "Why do you think to do that for me? But you won't touch

my face." She speaks as if to herself and gathers her things up slowly to leave.

"You're still upset about the mice," Scott says.

"No. I don't care about the mice."

"You think I'm sick in the head for what I do to them," Scott says.

"No."

"I don't need it. So how about you stop coming over here and drinking my beer and burning my firewood."

Phoebe looks at him, stunned. Blood floods her face.

"I don't think you're sick for what you do to them," she says. Every vein in her forehead and tendon in her neck becomes visible. "I think you are a stupid animal, going about your day, dicking around and pretending it's all alright, but you can't see a goddamn thing." Her voice rises until her face turns too dark to see her freckles. "And you're either resigned to this or else you just lack the sense to do something about it." "You're insane," Scott says.

She's gone before it's off his tongue. Sweet of her to have turned off the burners. He would have forgotten.

## I would like you to do something for me.

That's why you're here now. She put it off for as long as she could but then you started to die.

Can I ask you something? Does your mother still wear white underwear? Do you know?

I wrote this like I used to write monologues and I rehearsed it until I remembered it. Pacing back and forth across my cell, reciting this, practicing until my hallmates lost their minds. I have never been so nervous.

I'm not a bad person. I'm just bad luck. Don't you think the reason you're sick is because of me? I used to burn things just so I wouldn't feel so angry, so guilty. There is something wrong with me but I don't know what it is. Sometimes I don't care. Sometimes I hate myself. Sometimes I derive some pleasure from being a plague. Today is the worst day of this girl's life and for me, it is just another day.

If I could have fallen in love instead of ending up here, I would have picked your mother. I like her. She's silent inside, as if her skin encapsulates a vacuum. A bit of outer space, shaped like a woman. When she sits here at this table with me, I watch the reflection of these lights move on the surface of her eyes. I think inside her is unknowable heat and frigidity, intelligent life, pain compacted by the gravity of necessity, no more than a handful of it, but dense beyond comprehension. And I would've gotten to know your name. Choose it. Smell that newborn smell on your scalp before the bones in your skull closed up, when you still had a hole in your head. I would have liked to see your toothless smile and your indigo infant eyes, before they changed to their permanent color. If they'd seen me sooner, would they have turned brown instead of blue? When you cut a baby's hair, it never grows back the same.

There's a story about a god who fucks a reluctant mortal and the resulting child brings about the fall of an entire city. As my blood and my heir, which city will you burn to the ground? Legends like us-- we don't even hurt by design, yet greatness is measured in the wake of our disturbance. Look at your mother-- I unleashed a void with a bang-- a big one-- because I am a god of many myths. I put a sun in her. Think of the entropy you'll cause once you go dark. Imagine the systems as they spiral apart.

It is the job of the kidneys to filter impurities from the blood. See how exhausted yours are. You have inherited a contaminated blood. Here is the flesh to enable it.

On Friday, it rains. At the end of the day, Scott runs from the lab to the parking garage but it doesn't keep him dry. He thinks there are few things as unpleasant as wet socks. He thinks that at this time, Phoebe's three-hour seminar is wrapping up and she will be walking home.

There is no need to drive along Phoebe's route but Scott does. The rain distorts the world beyond the windshield and the wipers move and make noise like a metronome. Though they screech at constant intervals, they feel to Scott as if they are speeding up.

The phone rings in his pocket. He answers without taking his eyes off the sides of the road, where the trees look to be melting and Phoebe could be walking.

"Hello."

"Hi, baby."

"Is it broken again?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be over in a minute," Scott says and disconnects. A figure in black appears as he turns the corner. By the way it moves, by the way it walks only on its toes-- Scott knows who it is. He approaches and taps his horn.

She stops and turns. There's something not right about sounding the horn. Not when she's out in the rain-- and not just any rain, but a cold one. And she's holding her books under her clothes with her arms across her chest and she's in no hurry because she's already wet. It might as well rain right through her.

Scott rolls down his window. The water stings. "Come here," he calls. She is not so far away but he can't see her. In no rush, she walks around the car and gets in.

"I have to go by my mom's but then I can take you home," he says. She nods as she pulls back her hood and peels away the books from where they stick to her skin. The ink runs and stains her hands. Her stomach must look like watercolor.

"Are they ruined?"

"Just the outsides," she says. She looks out the passenger window. He can't see her face-only the hair stuck to her neck. He makes it warmer in the car.

"What's at your mom's?" Phoebe asks.

"The basement floods. I have to go unclog the pump."

They don't drive far from campus. Scott parks on the street beside a small, brick house. The bricks are old and have started to take on a rounded shape, the weather having eroded their edges. In the summer, there is wisteria. "Wait here," Scott says and leaves the car running. Phoebe shakes despite the heat so dry it makes her eyes hurt.

Inside, his mother is putting on her shoes. She is already dressed in navy scrubs for work.

"Scott?" she calls when she hears the front door open.

"It's me." He steps into the kitchen, seeping water.

"Must be really coming down," she says.

"You can't hear it?"

"Let me get a towel. You want some coffee? I don't leave for another half hour."

"I can't," Scott says, opening the door to the basement. "I've got a friend waiting in the car."

Downstairs, the water is already an inch high. The boxes rest on raised shelves but the humidity makes the cardboard soft like bread. It stinks of mold.

Scott examines the pump and locates the blockage. Next time he'll show Mom how to do it herself. She can be the one to save this basement every time it storms. He's already told her he'd prefer to seal it up with cement, though he's not sure if that's even possible. Any place underground is a tomb.

The box labeled "ALBUMS" looks about ready to split. Scott carries it upstairs.

"You shouldn't keep pictures in the basement," he says and sets the box on the table. "It's too damp."

His mother stands by the radiator, fanning out books and placing paper towels between the pages. They are Phoebe's books and Phoebe's shoes drying in the hot air.

"You shouldn't keep friends in the car," Mom says. "It's rude."

"I was just going to run her home."

"She's in the bath now. Her clothes are in the dryer." She sets the last book down and pours a cup of coffee.

"Why would you do that?"

"She was blue. It's not going to kill you to wait."

Scott pulls out a chair and sits.

"Go take a shower in my bathroom," she says, her hands wrapped around the mug.

He shakes his head.

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"No."

Mom makes a *huh* noise in her throat, a little hook of a *huh* that Scott knows better than to acknowledge.

"I asked how she knew you. She said she had a class with you. That you wore a barn jacket and wrote with a chewed blue pen." She pauses and blows across the surface of her coffee. "Why does she remember that?"

Scott shrugs. "Who knows."

"She was looking at your track pictures. I told her you wanted to play football but weren't allowed. She didn't understand why."

"Did you tell her?" Scott asks.

"No."

He unfolds a towel resting on the table and wraps it around him.

"She's the first you've brought here."

"You brought her in," Scott says, pulling the towel tighter. He can feel what she is about to say, like creatures skimming past him in dark water. Beneath him, the basement is flooded and above him, Phoebe is submerged.

"You're a good man, Scott."

The pages of Phoebe's books brush against each other, louder as they dry. The coffee maker sputters. When did she replace man with boy? He can't remember.

"Scott? You're a good one."

"Mom."

"I've never seen you hurt a thing."

It's got to be the house making him this way. He shouldn't have brought the albums up. This house makes him feel weak. It makes him feel sick again. And she keeps pushing, keeps saying sorry. It makes him think of scars beneath this shirt. It makes him think of Phoebe in white underwear, hands over her eyes, counting down from a hundred, a thousand, from a million and when she gets to zero, she can look. But she keeps starting over. It makes him think of cities laid waste and stars burnt out. Ruins and black holes.

You can't live forever on dialysis but you can live on in a son.

"Don't say anything to him," Mom had said. "Don't tell him your name. Don't answer his questions. I would go with you. I wish I could go with you. If he says one word that makes you uncomfortable, you tell the guard and he'll take you out. Do you understand?"

But Scott stayed for it all. Why did he do that? Why did he listen?

"What did he want?" Mom asked. She gripped his wrists until his hands went numb. "Nothing."

"What happened? What did he say?"

We're not supposed to exchange names because we're not supposed to be able to find each other.

## I'm not a bad person.

You have inherited bad blood.

When he was done with it all, the monologue and the gesticulations, it was as if he expected Scott to clap. And though he wasn't supposed to speak, Scott said, "I don't want to be like you. Why am I like you?"

The man-- his father-- took it as any father would. So the performance concluded with an unscripted "oh," syllable when trying to recapture his breath. It hadn't been a scheme, Scott thought, but a dream. "Well. Why is a raven like a writing desk?" the man said, holding the heel of his hand against his chest, as if trying to plug up a hole in his lung.

After the surgery, Scott came close to forgetting it all. Then the basement started leaking and parole came two consecutive lifetimes too soon. Nightmares of chasing replaced nightmares of being chased but Mom worked nights and was never there when he woke. *I am not in any pain*, he said and still says. *I am not in any real distress*. He can walk, he can eat, he can see but not very well. These are not the signs of distress. Sometimes-- but not very often-- he faces the corner and closes his eyes because something isn't right.

Phoebe wore garnet stud earrings the first day of class. She wore her sleeves pulled halfway down her hands. Why does he remember this? Who knows. Phoebe wears nothing in the bath. But don't-- don't think of it.

"We're in a fight," Scott says. "I think she's going to give up soon."

"Is that what you want?" Mom asks.

He shrugs.

"Then you shouldn't let it happen."

"It is what I want," he says.

"I don't think so."

"It is."

"You bring her here, hoping your house or your mother will explain everything. You bring the albums up thinking she can just flip through those so you don't have to answer any questions."

"Have you finally snapped?" Scott asks, looking at her. She is still and he wishes she would move. He would like to move her. "It's all caught up with you."

"Don't," she says. "You think she's ready to give up-- what about me? I tell you who you are, I tell you so often you don't even hear it. You were scared of babies, scared you'd drop them so I made you hold them-- hold them close to your throat, I said, and your voice put them right to sleep. I tell you, Scott-- you can't say I never told you. I don't understand how you can be so selfless and so selfish at the same time."

"You're insane," Scott says, waving his hand.

"Fine," she says and picks up her bag. It is raining still but she forgets an umbrella when she leaves.

"You get sort of mean when you don't like what you're told," Phoebe says, stepping into the kitchen. She wears an old pair of Scott's sweatpants and a gray t-shirt, shoulders stained dark by her wet hair. "You have a temper."

"Why are you wearing my clothes?" Scott says. "I don't want you in my clothes." "Your mom gave them to me." "Christ, it's like a goddamn barrage," he says, standing from his chair as she sits down on the other side of the table. "What do you want?"

Phoebe looks at him. "Two in you and three in me. What's it mean?"

"No," Scott says, tossing his towel on the floor. "A raven and a writer's desk. What the fuck does that mean?"

"I asked first."

"A raven and a writer's desk. What's the answer?"

"Forget it," Phoebe says and stands. "I give up. I want to go home."

"Not until you tell me."

"It doesn't mean anything, Scott," she says as she collects her books. "A raven is like a writer's desk because a riddle asked. Because some lunatic posed a question no one could answer. So we all look for a connection but they are nothing alike."

She steps into the laundry room off the kitchen and Scott hears her open the dryer. When she emerges, she's wearing her own clothes.

"Let's go," she says.

"Two in you and three in me," Scott says. "I was talking about kidneys."

"I don't understand."

"I used to be sick. I had a transplant."

She holds her books. Her head is tilted. "Then wouldn't you only have one?"

Scott shakes his head. "They don't take them out. They just put another one in."

She wants to sit back down, Scott thinks. Look, she wants to put her things down.

"I never would have gotten that."

"I know," he says. If she would just sit back down. "It wasn't fair."

## Whose Monkeys?

I take medication. Okay? That's true. But I'm not retarded. I'm in Kotsky's class. That's also true but I'm also not retarded, not like those other kids I have to sit in class with, those nosepickers and windowlickers. Then there's the kids in wheelchairs that drool and can't talk and got crunched up legs. That's another story. I'm not like those kids. Really, I shouldn't even *be* in that class. I only *am* on account of my parents who think I got a mental learning disease called dyspepsia that mixes up letters like Boggle. That's why I'm just a little behind in reading.

People always stop me when I'm telling something important. They all the sudden got a lot of questions about have I took my medication today and am I telling stories. They always ask me that but I don't tell stories. That's not me. People always telling me about the boy crying wolf but I don't cry about wolves. Wolves don't scare me. I am a wolf. I'm like a lone wolf. I don't have a pack. And most of the time, that's the way I like it. Only sometimes I might like a couple other wolves around. On special occasions mostly, like a feeding frenzy or a full moon. Mostly I like to roam alone though. No one to worry about but me and I don't have to take care of no one else and I don't need no one else.

I say *mostly* I like being alone. Sometimes, Joe's around. Joe's my little brother. He's twelve. He likes me to draw dragons and stuff, says I'm real good at it, which I am. He can't draw at all. He's more of a sports guy, plays football and basketball and baseball and soccer. So he's got a lot of friends, you know, a pack. Me and Joe don't sit together at lunch. He sits with his friends who I don't like because they always say stuff. I might fight them some day. But I got to prepare. And anyway, I want Joe to have his friends. You got to be a real special kind of tough special person to go without a pack. And I just don't know that he's cut out for it.

Really who I don't like is Greg Riddle. You got to remember that none of these guys say stuff when Joe's around to hear it, but when Joe's not around, it's always Greg with his big mouth full of jacked up yellow teeth who's got to say something. His teeth probably wouldn't look so yellow if his skin weren't so *white* but it is and it's covered in pink freckles so his face has the pattern of the cafeteria floor. Nasty. Plus that gingery yellow hair and he look like he got no eyelashes. And his ears always redder than the rest of him and he got some sort of skin problem, I think when he eat eggs, it's just disgusting and he don't like the *ocean* cause it make him itch. The *ocean*. Me and Joe is wolves, or at least, I'm the wolf. Joe could be like a hawk or owl or something with talons and can fly because Joe is someone who could probably fly if it was possible. Which it ain't, because science don't work that way. I know how science is, I'm just *saying*, if science was different, Joe could fly. Now Greg? He'd be one of those ferrets that *stink*. A stinking albino ferret. Albino is the science word for *white*. Even black people can be albino, swear. It's a real thing.

Mostly the main reason I hate Greg Riddle is cause he has a mean streak a mile wide and probably a screw loose too. The only reason he's allowed to act like a fool is cause he's funny. People think he is. I don't on account of I can read people real well and so I know. He's skinny and got double joints so he sticks his arms down his shorts so a leg and arm come out of each short hole and then he walk around backwards and sideways like a monster out of some demon exercising movie. And people don't think he look stupid like that, no they just laugh and call him a clown, even the teachers. Or he pretend to be deaf when there's a substitute teacher and like he just know sign language but the only words he know is the middle finger, the finger through the hole and the Bloods one but those ain't even real words deaf people *use*.

Really, all the Riddles are duds. Maybe not Mrs. Riddle. I guess she's nice. Greg must take after his daddy. Mr. Riddle calls himself a photographer and he takes pictures of teenage girls who want to be actresses. In the pictures, they don't wear clothes but got something like a big chain draped over their privates or some other pervy such thing. My mom calls him a pornotographer. Which actually is funny. Sometimes she thinks she's so funny, but actually that kind of is.

I was glad when Joe stopped hanging around so much with Greg. It was after Christmas when Greg got that bow. A really nice bow that I would have liked to get for Christmas but I asked for a drone instead. Let me be real clear-- I asked my *mom* and *dad* for a drone. I don't ask Santa anymore because Santa's for kids or the pinheads in my class. But the drone got stuck in a tree Christmas morning and we couldn't get it down. We tried throwing stuff and shooting at it with the BB gun. We tried climbing it but the climbable branches were too far above us. I pouted at dinner and my dad said I could fix my attitude because in 33 years, Jesus the baby would be crucified on a cross and that was worse than a toy in a tree. I said well baby Jesus has 33 more years and I didn't even get half an hour with my dumb drone that I didn't even really want but they got me anyway. Then I got knuckled on the skull. I swear I went lights out, ended up on the floor. Course, Mama just said I was being dramatic and Daddy said he'd had about enough of this asinine behavior. They got their favorite words. Asinine ain't even a bad one, but it sounds like it. Sometimes I use it.

Yeah, well, we saw Greg the next day, with his big fancy pants compound bow and a haybale to shoot arrows at. He wouldn't let my try it, said I'd break it for sure and then I got mad and snapped an arrow and Greg gave me a cocked eyebrow and said, "I rest my case." So Joe and I went home, him saying to me that I shouldn't break stuff when people are teasing me about breaking stuff. "Then you just prove them right," he said. I pushed him off the curb and then ran, beat him home. If they say I break things, then I'll go ahead breaking all their things, all the things they don't even know they love until they're broken.

On New Years, when the air smelled all like fireworks and the smoke hung in it like clouds on the ground, Greg said the gator came out of the pond. That gator came out of the pond all the time to dry off on sunny days but it never bothered nobody in the neighborhood. Greg even used to feed it, which you ain't supposed to do. He could get it to come up kind of close to him. Used to show off, acting like he had some kind of special connection with that animal when all he really had was a baloney sandwich in his pocket. But he said that thing came out the water chasing him and trying to kill him. Lucky he had his bow on him. He didn't tell nobody about his almost being eaten by a gator until the next day, when somebody found the thing wandering around close to the pond, blinded by arrows sticking out its eyes. "Do something, Jimmy," Mama said. "Not my circus, not my monkeys," Daddy said like usual. "You better make it your goddamn monkey," she said and it was almost funny but she was almost crying. So he shot it. And he's used to shooting things, especially people probably because he was in the army.

Joe didn't even see the thing, dragging itself along on the grass by the pond, no more eyes but arrows. I didn't either. And we didn't want to think about it but I said, "If a gator was chasing me, I mighta shot it too." But Joe didn't say a thing to me and he didn't say a thing to Greg either, for a long time.

I thought about letting Joe be a part of my pack, even though it would be tough for me because that's not my nature. I drew a picture of us as wolves-- I was all black and he was grayish with some spots and a white-tipped tail. When I started drawing it, I thought the all black one would look cooler but when it was done, the gray one looked so good that I thought about changing it and making me the gray one and Joe the black one but I didn't. Then he started hanging out with Tookie and I never showed it to him. It wouldn't have made sense anyway. Like I said, Joe is a bird.

Tookie's this black kid in Joe's grade. He's small, with shirt collars that are always stretched out and super-clean brand new looking sneakers that make his feet look too big. "He's so quiet," my mom said to Joe when she met him, "but very polite." Yeah sure. The first time he came over, Joe said, "This is Tookie," and I looked at him and then said sort of sideways but not that quiet to Joe, "*nigger*." The kid didn't even get mad-- he just turned to Joe, looking confused, like I was retarded or something.

"Ignore him," Joe said when they were walking away, "He don't mean it. I swear, he just says anything that pops into his head, especially when he know he ain't supposed to say it or even think it."

I don't know if that's true but I didn't like it. I went and kicked all the plants in the backyard and got in trouble for it.

Tookie turned out to be all right. He pretended like I never acted rude to him.

"Why do they call you Tookie? That's a weird name."

"Because my last name's Williams."

"That doesn't make sense," I said. "Nicknames come from real names. Like my real name

is Wallace-- that's what's on my birth certificate and report card-- but for short, I go by Ace."

"You mean Wally?" Tookie said.

"My family calls me that. But everybody who is not my family calls me Ace."

"Shut up, Wally, they do not," Joe said.

"That's not my name-- I get to pick my name and if I want people to call me Ace, then they have to."

"No one's going to call you that. It's stupid."

"Wally is stupid! It's like what you call a squishy baby stuffed duck toy!"

"Okay, man," Tookie said, "Relax. I'll call you Ace. I think it's cool. I used to have a dog named Ace."

"What kind of dog? Like a wolf-dog?"

"No, it was little."

"Well Ace could be a wolf-dog too."

"Sure."

I never blinded a gator but once I smashed a turtle. On accident, course, it weren't chasing me or nothing. I was riding my four wheeler and didn't see it or maybe I thought it was a rock but I clipped it with my left front wheel and it went flying like a tiddlywink, landed at least fifty yards from where it'd been. It was exactly like in Mario Bros. and I was laughing but also just a little worried when I went looking for it. I thought I might take it home and then I'd have a pet, name it Cuff or Link like Rocky's turtles because I'm pretty good at boxing too. Maybe he'd turn out to be a box turtle. And if he were a little banged up when I got to him, I'd take care of him and feed him leaves and he'd be real grateful when he got better, so grateful that he'd follow me around. Real slow, course.

When I found him, he wasn't okay. His shell was broken in a lot of places but the pieces were still stuck to his body. Like when you bust a merengue cookie and the crunchy pieces don't go nowhere because the gluey goo inside holds them in place. And there was blood, a lot of blood and it was red. I don't know why I thought maybe turtles and gators bleed blue or something but they don't. Who knew a turtle had so much human blood? And he just lied there, blinking.

I got out of there quick, and I wouldn't say I was crying, not really, I don't really cry, but I didn't feel good. When I got home, Mama asked what was wrong with me and I just went upstairs and waited for Joe to get home, what felt like forever. When he finally did and I told him, he said I should have given him what you call a mercy kill or put him out of his misery. Doing nothing, Joe said, made it worse.

We went back out there after dinner when it was getting dark. Mama didn't want us going but Joe looked at her serious and said we had something to do. And for some reason, when he gets like that, she always lets him go. I thought of Daddy going out gator hunting with his shotgun and how I only had a pocketknife to kill a thing with, but all the time we looked, I kept thinking, "This one's my monkey. My monkey. My monkey." It took us a long time to find the spot but we managed, and we found that the turtle was dead. Crawling with ants so we left.

Probably because of Tookie, Greg got jealous and started coming over again, looking for Joe. I can tell you right now, Mama was not happy about that. Sometimes I sit on the stairs and listen to her try to talk to Daddy while he sits there watching Animal Planet cuttlefish or lemur programs on mute and rubbing his dry feet together, making noise like a cricket.

"Hey, honey?" she always starts, like she got a question she don't want to ask. *Hey, honey*? to Daddy when he's on his fourth beer and she thinks he's had enough. *Hey, honey*? to Joe when he come in sulking and not wanting to talk. *Hey, honey*? to me when she don't want me doing experiments or inventions. *What're you doing there*?

"Huh?" Daddy said and from where I was, I could hear Mama sit down on the arm of his chair. But then it got hard to hear her. Sometimes she knows who's on the stairs.

Still, I got a little about Joe and him being sensitive as a ripped callus, which I can say is true because of how he used to cry so much as a kid. Now, being at the start of a thing called puberty, he has pretty much plugged up the crybaby feelings. Which is fine by me. I never cared for all the crying about stray cats and what happened to fake heroes in made-up movies. Now only sometimes does he let out a feeling, and it is always an accident.

Well I got bored trying to hear what was being said. Something about Tookie being good for Joe and Greg not. No news there. Greg ain't good enough to test a bomb on.

"He's going to have to learn to get along with different people," Daddy said. "And he's got to toughen up."

Don't think Mama wanted to hear that.

"Wally!" she yelled.

"Ma'am?"

"Go find your brother. He was supposed to call an hour ago."

So I went out looking for Joe like usual because he never calls when he's supposed to. Found him at Marko and Fifi's house-- they were in there playing video games. Marko and Fifi's parents are from a place called Yugoslavia, which is why Marko and Fifi have the names that they do. Once I asked Fifi:

"Why do they call you Fifi? That's a weird name."

"It's short for Filip."

"Oh. Like how my name is Wallace but everyone calls me Ace for short."

"Yeah," he said. "Okay."

"Except Fifi is kind of a girl's name."

"No it's not. Not in Yugoslavia."

"Have you ever been to Yugoslavia?"

"No."

"Then how would you know?"

"My parents. And I've been to Sarajevo."

"You don't even go to Yugoslavia for Thanksgiving? We go to North Carolina for

Thanksgiving because that is where my family comes from."

"No, we can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not a place."

Fifi's only eight so you can't expect him to make much sense.

"Then how come your parents say they're from there?"

Really, it's not fair because when I said I was from Tattooine, which is also not a real

place and I know it's not a real place, I got into all sorts of trouble for being asinine.

"It used to be a place."

"Oh." Probably, Yugoslavia is like Atlantis. It sank into the ocean.

Fifi is usually the one who answers the door. The mom and dad aren't around much. They also got a dog that's pretty nasty and tries to run out of the house.

"They're upstairs," Fifi said, straddling the dog. He wasn't wearing a shirt, like usual-just soccer shorts pulled near up to his nipples. He and Marko are both real good at soccer. And Fifi's muscly like he should be in the circus, a real sly face and a shaved head. Always looks like he's having some secret joke because of his slant face, crooked smirk like he'd be a coyote in my animal world. By the looks of his mouth, he'd been drinking red Gatorade.

"Come in so he'll shut up," he said. I went inside but the dumb dog kept right on barking.

Upstairs, they were sitting around the TV in Marko's room. Joe sat on the edge of the bed, Tookie on the floor. Greg was also there, lying on his stomach. And Marko sat on his laundry, a hand down his pants.

"You were supposed to call Mom to say where you ended up," I said to Joe, who watched the screen and chewed his tongue.

"I forgot."

"She said she tried to call but no one answered."

"There's no phone up here," Joe said.

"Why didn't Fifi get it?"

He shrugged.

"Well I had to walk all the way down here because you didn't call and Fifi couldn't pick up the phone."

"Sorry," he said. The TV had them like moths.

"Wanna play cops and robbers?" I asked.

"Nope," Greg said, "No one wants to play cops and robbers."

Greg-- always got something to say. Sometimes, I almost tell him to shut his hole but I never do. I ain't scared of him. But I never do.

Joe stayed the night there. They all did. But not me. Maybe I would've, if anyone had really wanted me to, but I had stuff to do anyway. I'm always real busy. There's my tree fort and I go for rides on my four wheeler and all that. I go hunting as my wolf self and make sure no other predators take up on my turf. I learn about predators on TV shows I watch with my dad after dinner. There's predators underwater, in Africa, in trees and even very teeny telescopic ones in your own body. Which is why I have to go on regular checks to make sure there's no gulper eels or packs of dingoes or tapeworms moving into my territory. I tell him I have to be the topof-the-food-chain-A-alpha predator around here, so if he sees any signs of suspicious scat, he's got to let me know ASAP.

"Wally, *shhh*," he says most of the time.

But there's not even any sound. Volume's all the way down and I don't even know what dingoes sound like when they howl.

Joe got home the next day around lunch, looking funny. I can't say how. When Mama asked if he wanted grilled cheese, he said no, he was tired-- that was all he said but it was like the first words he ever spoke. Cracking open that throat like something that's never been opened-- a letter, a can of soda, a geode, an egg.

"What time did you go to sleep?"

"Late," he said and went upstairs to our room.

I went four wheeling, waiting for him to wake up the rest of the day. By dinner, he was still in bed. On the stairs, I heard Mama say to Daddy, "I think something happened."

"Huh?"

"I think something's wrong."

By lunch the next day, Joe was still in bed and I was running out of routes to ride out the wait. It rained and I got stuck in a puddle close to the marsh. Some turtles rested on logs sticking out of the water, poking their heads up at the sun. When I went near them, they slid back in the water where it's safe. Because I'm a predator who kills turtles by busting up their bodies but I don't do it on purpose.

"Jimmy, something happened. I got a bad feeling," Mama said. "Talk to him."

So Daddy went and sat on Joe's bed, asked him, "did something happen?"

And Joe said, "No, sir."

"Well come downstairs and have something to eat. You're making your mother nervous." "Yes, sir."

So he had a bowl of cereal and then threw it all up.

"Goddamn it, Jimmy, I know, I know, it's not right."

"He said nothing happened."

"Wally," Mama said, handing me a washed dish to dry. "Do you think something happened?"

"I don't know," I said. "Yeah."

"You do?" she said.

"Yeah."

"You think so too?" And she put her hand on her neck and swallowed. "Will you talk to him?"

"Okay."

There's that feeling when your brother is surviving something and your mom is near crying over it. Like a splinter stuck somewhere in your important organs, a stabbing splinter that makes you not want to breathe too big a breath.

A couple of days and me and Joe's room was starting to smell like a sock. All he did was sweat, sleep and not shower. Mama had me bring him toast that he didn't want. I sat on the stairs because the whole room stank like Joe's oily, unwashed hair. The doorbell rang and I listened to Mama invite someone in.

It was a black lady, small enough to be a kid. She crossed her purple sweater over her like the wind was blowing.

"I'm Amber Williams," she said, "Malik's mother."

"Who's Malik?" I yelled down the stairs but no one answered.

Mama made Amber Williams sit down in the kitchen and drink a cup of coffee. I sneaked closer.

"...the other night and he came home around one, upset. I was just wondering if you noticed anything with Joe."

I tried to get even closer but I stepped on a squeaky part of the floor and they both shut up real quick, then started again but quieter.

"As soon as he shut the door, fell down sobbing and when I asked him what happened, he just kept saying *I can't tell you*, *I can't tell you*..."

It's not that I was scared, I just had to get out. I didn't care if Mama heard me running away from spying. I wanted to be my wolf self but I couldn't change. I was just Wally when I went knocking on Marko and Fifi's door, and when Fifi answered, holding back that snarling dog, I said, "Did something happen the other night?" I couldn't be a lone wolf to ask that, couldn't be anything except the older brother of Joe, my number one monkey.

"I don't know," Fifi said. But his coyote face, that devil tricking look... I got that insta-hot thing like when I should be able to read something but it won't hold still. *See the letters in your head*, Daddy says when we practice my spelling words. *Hear the order of the sounds they make*. I don't know why but I was glad about being so stupid. Glad for once.

In the middle of the night, Mama and Daddy had a fight. I sat on the stairs and listened. Usually, Joe listens with me but he was still feeling poor.

"I know it's got something to do with that bastard Greg," Mama said. A little curl of smoke came up the banister. She must've been having a cigarette, thinking we were asleep.

"I'm sure it does," Daddy said.

"Can you just turn off the TV for a minute?" she said. "A fucking minute?"

"What do you want me to do?" Daddy asked. "Shoot him? Can't do that."

"Then I'll do it myself."

Daddy didn't have anything to say to that.

"Do you not care?" Mama said. The floor creaked as she walked back and forth across the living room. "Do you not see it?"

"I see it plain."

"Don't you want to know?"

"No," Daddy said. "You want to know what happened over there? Nothing good. And if he don't want to talk about it, maybe it's for a reason. You ever consider he may be protecting you? Or himself?" "I can handle it. He knows that. I'm his mother. And whatever it is, he's got to say something."

"No, it don't work like that. Sometimes you get hurt and you go to the doctor to get it cleaned out and stitched up, you do that if you can. Sometimes, you leave it be, let it close around grit because you simply wouldn't survive a proper recovery. You would just die of shock and pain. Or else you'd stop to tend yourself, stop too long and something else'd kill you."

"This isn't Afghanistan, Jimmy, for Christ's sake."

I went back to my room. I didn't want to hear it any more.

"Joe?" I said. The room smelled so strong of his dirty hair, it was like I was in his head. "What?"

"There's something about Fifi I don't like."

He sighed and rolled over. "He's not bad."

"Did something happen?"

He didn't answer. Went back under the water.

"Joe?"

"I already told everybody nothing happened. No."

"How come Tookie left early?"

"How'd you know that?"

But I played the trick where you wait.

"He's scared of dogs and the dog bit him."

And I waited some more.

"Do you believe me?"

Did I? Something. It's that feeling you get in a dark part of the house, when there's something you don't know but know is there, and a voice breathes on the back of your neck, making your little hairs stand up, it whispers *run*? *run*? *run*? It's a predator you don't see, maybe a slinky black panther over your head, same as night-- only two yellow eyes giving off their own light, only two yellow eyes until it gets you. Maybe a snake in the grass, a whip of a worm swimming through your blood, maybe something that lives in your own house and might grab your ankle if it hangs off the bed. So you run out of the dark rooms and into the ones where your dad is watching schools of fish turn and sparkle on the TV, and he calls you asinine, and you should be getting old for this. But something pulls up your hackles.

"Doing nothing makes it worse," I said.

"Worse than what, Wally? What am I making worse? How is it worse?" There was a click in his throat and an almost silent whine coming out of his place in the dark. I couldn't watch but the sound was enough.

Would you believe it? Me-- Wally the wolf-- glad to be stupid, and safe in a completely dark room.

## One in the Hand

At the bird farm, my father raises quail and pheasants for people who pay to shoot them. He places them in certain bushes that he marks to remember and then when he brings the hunters round, says *look there*, hinting, as if it's all an adult Easter egg hunt. Then the dogs go in and point and try to scare them up, but the birds are smart enough not to fly. The hunters have to kick at the ground to get them in the air, because you can't risk shooting a dog and anyway, it seems like bad sport. Kick a bird up with your boot, shoot it down with a spray of BBs.

I dropped out of school about a year ago because I got myself raped. After a few months of trying and failing to fix myself, I told Dad. When he asked, "Do you want me to come get you?" I said yes. The month-old dog Ruben had given me slept on my lap during the ride home. When Dad asked what happened, I admitted I was out late, walking. He asked if I knew who it was. I said I didn't.

"What happened to your hair?"

"He took it," I said. I touched the ends, which fell almost below my chin. I remembered the noise of him sawing through it, louder than you'd think possible, like locusts. Somewhere, maybe in a drawer or beneath a bed, handfuls of my hair lay hidden.

Dad didn't speak, just drove, but I think he was disturbed. I wanted to tell him that it doesn't hurt to have your hair cut. His mother probably told him that, once, when she cut his baby hair for the first time.

"And you're okay?" he said, tapping a can of dip against his thigh. The motion compacted the tobacco against one edge. He took a pinch, placed it behind his lip while he steered with his elbows. "You went to the doctor?" "Yes sir." Then I told him I was tired of answering questions and he didn't ask me anymore. Just drove with a soda bottle spittoon between his legs, wishing he had someone to kill.

He didn't make me work right away. I spent a lot of time sleeping, shooting, teaching the dog not to bite. My favorite gun in the house was the Winchester lever-action rifle that Dad called a cowboy gun. When he saw I liked it, he cleaned it and gave it to me as a gift.

For the first months, we sat on the porch in the evenings, drinking beer and shooting the bottles, caps and cans. When we ran out of things to shoot, we drank more. Load, fire, eject the casing and forget about it. Fire, break the bottle and forget about it. Load, fire, put a hole in a can and pretend it's my head. Load, fire, Dad says nice one. Load-- let him have a go. Fire, shatter green glass like skull fragments. Load, fire, I forget about it. Until the dog comes home with glass in his foot.

I named the dog Solomon. Dad said he was a Malinois, could tell from the fawn coat, black mask, stature. Dad knows breeds. Solomon was a good one-- smarter than the pointers and didn't let them eat before he did. After several months, when his ears stood up straight, I found myself wishing Ruben could see him.

"Should I tell him to come by?" Dad asked, as Ruben frequently called the house. Usually I said no and made Dad tell him I wasn't in at whatever time he called. They were comfortable with each other, Ruben having grown up in a bigger house in this same town. When we wound up at the same college, Dad said it was nice that I would have a ride home. I hated to think that they talked about me, and quietly, I hated that the gifts they gave were guard dogs and guns. I suppose Ruben came by in January because I wouldn't talk to him on the phone. That afternoon, the cold was caustic. I was digging for the tulip bulbs when I saw his truck coming up the drive. He didn't slow down much to brake, and when he got out, he was in a hurry.

"I've been calling," he said, holding his hands out away from his sides. Before I could say anything, Solomon came around the house with a rabbit in his mouth. He set the carcass down and barked, snout wrinkled and brown with blood. Ruben took his attention off me.

"Lie down," I told the dog, and he did.

Ruben approached and placed his hand on Solomon's head.

"He's gotten so big," he said. Solomon was tense. "How old is he now?"

He already knew but I answered anyway. "About one."

"What'd you name him?"

"Solomon." The dog looked over as I said his name and then relaxed enough to pull apart the rabbit. Ruben gave him a scratch as I put the last of the tulip bulbs in a plastic grocery bag.

"How's your dad?" Ruben asked. "Is he here?"

"No, he's out." I thought of Dad tossing birds into the bed of his truck. He'd come home soon to pluck and dress them. "Let's go in," I said, taking the bag of bulbs and kicking my boots against the porch step to dislodge the dirt. Solomon waited for me to step inside before he followed. He did not wait for Ruben.

In the kitchen, the air smelled of leeks because I was heating soup on the stove. It was customary for us to feed the hunters lunch while Dad prepared the birds for them to take home. They didn't even have to touch guts or pull a single feather.

"Are you hungry?" I asked. "Do you want coffee?"

"Coffee is good."

I poured him a mug and stirred in a bit of cream. He stood at the window, looking out at the backyard. "A real farm," he said.

"Just a garden." Most of which was dead already from frost.

"Isn't this a bird farm?" Ruben asked, taking the coffee.

"I call it a bird farm. Because we feed them and they're sort of tame. But we don't have a coop for them. They just live out there," I said, waving at trees.

"What about that?" he said, pointing at the chicken coop.

"Chickens."

He nodded and sat on a stool, Solomon under his feet. Though he'd left the rabbit carcass outside, he'd brought in mud and blood. I put two logs in the woodstove and a pot of water on top, to help with the dryness.

"I wanted to see how you were," Ruben said in an odd way, as if I weren't a stranger or a

friend. "Are you taking any classes?"

"No," I said. "Did you graduate?"

He nodded. "Stayed in the city, though. Been working. Got a girlfriend."

"Karen?" I asked. He'd been seeing her for about two weeks when I left. Before that it

was Annie or Danielle. I can't remember which one was first, but I was always good with names.

"No. Her name's Amanda."

"Oh."

He nodded and looked into his mug. Several rogue grinds swirled on the surface of the coffee.

"What have you been doing?" he asked, transfixed by the black specks.

"Nothing," I said. "This."

"I was thinking," Ruben said, "about how we used to drive around. I'd go to drop you off at home and you'd ask if we could drive until you got tired. I was thinking about that." He took an abrupt sip of coffee, specks and all. "I didn't really know my way around the city so I'd practice-- can I get from Sheetz to the package store without the GPS? Does this road come out somewhere? Remember?"

"Tell me about work," I said, "Or your girlfriend. Have you been drawing?"

He shrugged.

"Do you have reservations at Pain et Beurre for Valentine's Day?"

He always had Valentine's reservations at *Pain et Beurre*. His father's friend owned the place and each year, Ruben brought a different girl. At the end of the meal, he made the same reservations a year in advance.

"Yes. I'm taking Amanda. But I still haven't figured out what to get her."

I tried to recall what he'd gotten other girls.

"You could go with the usual chocolate," I said.

He sighed and scratched his jaw, making a sound like sandpaper. "No, we've been dating for four months. That's not enough."

"Have you drawn her portrait?" I asked.

"No."

"Then you should do that."

Ruben looked at me as if I weren't grasping his intent. "I can't give her a drawing as a

gift." He paused and thought. "What would you want?"

For the holiday? To be left alone. To not have to speak. To go to the beach with

Solomon. To gather the winter squashes and make more soup.

I looked at the plastic bag printed THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU seven times, then, smaller *Have a nice day*, and I looked at the bulbs inside and I picked one up and set it in front of Ruben.

"What is that?" he asked. "A tiny onion?"

"It's a tulip."

"No it's not," he said, smiling. He shook it and then held it to his ear as if it were a shell and he could hear the ocean in it. "A tulip."

I laughed.

"Well," he said, "I think Amanda's more of a jewelry girl." He took his phone out of his pocket and showed me pictures of silver things he was considering.

"Are they all so expensive?"

"Your money goes to your priorities.' My dad's favorite thing to say. Though he might live the other way around."

"Five hundred dollars?" I tried to think of how many pheasants a silver and diamond necklace was worth. Our money couldn't have gone to our priorities, even if we'd had enough.

"I paid more for Solomon," he said. "Quite a bit more."

I waited to answer because I wanted to make sure he was serious. He didn't look up at me, just flipped away on his phone.

"Why?" I asked.

Ruben shrugged. "I think I'll get the one with the heart. 'Corazon Pendant.' What do you think?" He showed me the picture of the necklace again.

Under the table, Solomon yawned and I thought he was worth much more than Corazon Pendants, much more even than pheasants.

"That's the one," Ruben said, even though I hadn't spoken.

Hours after Ruben left, Dad came home with extra game.

"The party paid for twenty four but didn't think they could eat all of them," he said as he took his jacket off. It was waxed canvas, not pliable. When he set it on the floor, it stood up by itself, as if he had left his body inside of it.

So we had grouse for dinner-- decadent and fatty, but I was tired of it. I set a small saucer beside each of our glasses, where we spit the bones and BBs.

"Ruben came by today," I said as Dad set down his utensils and placed a toothpick in the corner of his mouth.

"Came by?" he said. "We're near two hours out of his way."

I dislodged a wishbone from some gristle and threw the leftovers on the floor for the dog.

"What did he have to say?" Dad asked.

"Not much," I said and he was okay with it. Sometimes he tried to worry for me, but usually he was too tired.

"I'm going to have a shower," he said and left the table.

I thought perhaps he had adjusted to his fear that I'd lost all feeling. Perhaps he was partly glad for it, thinking it was good for me to feel no pain. Months ago, I told him I wanted a lobotomy for my birthday; had he suspected then that I'd retained my sense of humor? Maybe it was the night something got into the chicken coop and slaughtered half the brood, when he found me kneeling in the pen holding a dying hen, crying, maybe it was then that he could take a breath because I was still a sentient daughter. Chickens aren't so stupid; they're even lovely up close, with feathers colored as rich as human irises, and careful reptilian feet, and vision capable of

picking insects and flecks of feed off a ground more detailed than we've ever cared to notice. Dad gathered all the other carcasses by the feet, let their dead wings unfurl upside down. He carried four in one hand like a bouquet, but held the one he took from me much closer. He seemed grateful and relieved that I remained capable of suffering. He seemed something else, too.

Ruben called about two weeks later and this time, Dad made me talk to him. He said he'd gotten rid of Amanda.

"Why?" I asked.

A crackle on the line indicated that he was shifting positions-- maybe sitting up or leaning forward. "I just felt like I wasn't getting what I want."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. It's not why I called. I was wondering if you'd want to grab dinner on Friday." Before I could say yes or no, he added, "I'll be coming to get you, probably around seven thirty." Then he hung up, which I thought was so strange.

I spent the rest of the day thinking about how we used to go for drives. When he'd turn on the heat, the inside of the windshield would fog up and he'd make me unbuckle, lean forward, and wipe it with my sleeve. I used to think I loved Ruben because I could recognize him from hundreds of yards away, even though my vision was bad when I didn't wear my glasses. By the way he moved, I always knew it was him. I thought I loved him because I'd begun to pick up his expressions, his favorite words, his manner of swearing. I thought something was going to happen for us, because he walked slow when I walked slow, and we both had the misconception that we were already old. But he exhausted me those last months, when my hair was gone. School had become too small a place; I felt I'd been living in a snowglobe, shaken every now and then. Ruben fidgeted too much and it gave me anxiety; I thought, *if he doesn't stop shaking his leg, if he rolls the window down to spit one more time, I'm going to lose my mind.* And there it'd go, my mind, floating away like a balloon I should have tethered to something, and in its absence I'd snap: "God*damn* it, can you be still?"

I began to believe everything he said was a citation, particularly the beautiful things. Every smart thing he said was some philosopher's idea; every kind thing belonged to a poet. Every true thing came originally from a story-- a story I already knew. I told him he was a plagiarist, that he couldn't think in a vacuum and that he wasn't real, never once, for me.

"What kind of tree is that?" I asked once as we drove past a copse of paper birches. He didn't know and his ignorance disgusted me. Sometimes he lied when he didn't know, spoke to me like he knew better, like he was playing chess with me. He lied and said he knew where we were when we were lost; he said he didn't watch that much porn; he said he couldn't remember the things he told me when he was drunk; he said he knew I'd be okay, said I was still the same.

Days before I left, Ruben drew my portrait for his art class. He used to draw me all the time because I was the only person who would sit still for an hour the night before his sketches were due. The last one he drew was more than a realist depiction; it had a feeling to it, but it didn't look like me at all.

I didn't realize Friday was Valentine's Day until Ruben showed up wearing a jacket. Dad must have known, though; he sat at the kitchen table cleaning his guns with Solomon beside him. "Are you ready?" Ruben asked, looking at my clothes, which I'd spent the day working in.

"I thought we were just going to get some sandwiches or something."

"No," he said in a way that suggested he didn't believe me. "The reservations. I didn't want to waste them."

I invited him in for a beer with Dad while I went upstairs to get dressed. I only had two dresses, zipped in garment bags. One was dark green and the other was a bridesmaid's gown. I unwrapped the green one and stepped into it. It was too loose and I shook the skirt to try to rid it of the plastic-bag smell. Probably, it was meant for springtime.

"Is this okay?" I called down the stairs. A minute later, Ruben came up.

"Sure," he said, leaning against the doorframe. In my mirror, I saw him watching as I pinned back my hair.

"I'll need about one more minute," I said. I thought he would leave but he didn't-- just watched me sift through my makeup bag, the old powders like relics. I used to wear eye makeup, but the pen was dry and my hand shook.

"I'll do it," Ruben said and took the pen from me. "Close your eye."

I closed both.

"Don't move," he said, and it reminded me of something unpleasant. I tried to put it out of my mind but his hands on my face made it impossible, and I wanted to step away but standing with my eyes closed made me feel like I might fall, though the ground was flat and constant beneath me.

Poor Ruben, trying to make me into the right girl, the one he wanted, but did he know that just months ago, I didn't think I wanted anything, not even water, not even to see? "There," he said, and when I opened my eyes, he was smiling at his work. I looked in the mirror and saw the perfect eyes he'd drawn on me. "Is it good?"

I nodded.

"I have something for you," he said and removed a silver chain from his breast pocket. As he clasped it at the back of my neck, I recognized the Corazon Pendant, the thing I never wanted. "Should we go now?"

"Do you want to go for a drive instead?" I asked, covering the pendant with my hand because it was cold and I didn't want to see it.

He looked at me for too long without changing his expression. I thought I could hear him telling himself that this would take time. "Okay," he said. "Just let me make a call first," and he set the reservations for next year. Next year, when the pendant's warmer and the season's open again. Next year, he thought I'd come around.

Dear T,

I am very sorry to say that there is no Jes living at this residence. I have enclosed all of your letters. You will notice that the envelopes have been opened. I am very sorry for this and can explain.

Your first letter came in February, around the time of my birthday. I didn't look at the front of the envelope; I assumed it was a birthday card from my mother. I realized my mistake immediately. Inside was your card from the Natural History Museum, the one with the mummies. "Jes," it said, "Still obsessed with Ancient Egypt? I've been thinking of you and I miss you. T."

Of course, you remember. I felt bad, sort of like a pervert, so I put the card and the envelope away and thought about sending it back in the mail later, but decided not to because I'd opened it. I don't know why I didn't throw it away.

Your next letter came several weeks later. I put it with the first but decided I would return this one, or else they might keep coming and there was no Jes here. Then I forgot about it-- I didn't remember until I was in the middle of a fight with Jack. As he swept the papers and cups of water off the table, flipped it. I remembered then.

Jack is my husband. Everyone says I am so lucky to have him, and I know that. They love him because he volunteers to teach CCD and he listens to people complain and is quite good looking, like Maria's brother in *West Side Story*. That's what they tell me. They don't know that I'm lucky for other reasons-- like when I was on bed rest with my second son, Jack would record little stories during his commute, using all his funny voices and accents, and then he'd come home and play them to me and we'd laugh until I peed myself. These people think Jack's a good one because he could charm water from the rock, but I know more than his charm. He attached bells to fringed strips of leather and tied them to our sons' ankles-- can you hear it? The sound of four small feet, falling like hailstones on our condominium floor, bells on the downstrokes.

I know I am lucky to have him; I only wish people wouldn't tell me so much, these people who don't know anything about our fights. All I asked was for him to please put his shoes in the closet, because I was thirty weeks along and having trouble bending down to pick them up; also, the boys were starting to leave their own shoes lying around. I don't know how it turned into the ordeal that it did. I never know. These people who tell me I am lucky have never seen the vein down the center of his forehead swell, never seen his hackles or displays of rage in which he abuses the furniture and perforates the drywall.

That's why I thought of you in the middle of that fight-- I thought, *there's someone who doesn't know my husband is a saint*. So I waited out the wrath of Jack and then shut myself in the bathroom to read your letter. I turned on the fan but Anthony still heard the paper sounds as I opened the envelope. "I know you're eating candy in there, Mom," he said. I don't know why he always thinks this. He used to say the same thing when I unwrapped tampons, but now I've been pregnant for months.

"Can I pee alone please?"

Then I heard the front door slam. Sometimes Jack takes the car and goes for a fast drive, then comes home late with a coldness that seems less like anger and more like hate. I wanted to be asleep when he got home, but I forgot to get one of the boys to take my shoes off before I put them to bed. I lay with my puffy ankles off the duvet, thinking of you in half-sleep.

"Jes," your letter said, "Did you get my last one? I'm sorry if you're not into mummies anymore. It's been awhile. I can't believe you liked those things so young. Did you know they'd remove all their organs before embalming them? They'd put your guts in jars, hook your brains out through your nostrils, then pack you full of spices as if you were a stuffed mushroom, some meal for the tomb."

Why'd you have to say those things? I dreamt Jack put his hands in my brain and scraped my skull clean of all matter, that he cut out my baby and put her in a canopic jar he'd sculpted himself.

I woke when the baby kicked; I thought someone was tugging her out of me. But of course there was no one, and the only motion in the room was the fan overhead. I went into Anthony and Michael's bedroom and watched them sleep for a while, Michael in his skinny pajamas, Anthony in his briefs. *Such good boys*, I thought, *my good boys*. I couldn't help myself; I picked Michael up, then knelt beside Anthony's bed.

"I had a bad dream," I said and he rolled over.

"Oh." He sat up, then took his blanket and we went to my room. Anthony took my shoes off for me and the three of us got into my bed. When Jack returned, we were already asleep, or pretending to be. He slept somewhere else.

Early the next morning, Jack woke us all by slamming the kitchen cabinets. The boys went out to him and I heard Michael ask for pancakes. I tried to go back to sleep but someone kept opening and shutting the refrigerator, making the condiment jars rattle, and someone ran the disposal several times.

Michael came in some time later, after the noise had finally stopped. "Are you hiding?" he asked, seeing I had a pillow over my face. "Can we make pancakes?"

In the kitchen, Anthony sat eating a bowl of cereal, bare except for his underwear and glasses. He flipped the channels on the TV like a grown man, barely catching an image before switching to another.

"Where's Dad?" I asked, removing the Bisquick from the pantry.

"Work."

"Already?"

"You shouldn't have made him mad," Anthony said, his chest speckled with hives from the cow's milk in his cereal. "Apologize."

I realized I was already scared of him.

That day, we went to a birthday party for my niece. I had forgotten to buy the present so we were late. At the store, Michael refused to walk so I had to carry him and Anthony kept picking out Lego sets for my niece who only likes Barbies.

It reminds me of your note about the blue gamepiece, an artifact from another Ancient Egyptian exhibit, which you said was carved to look like a "sleeping dog curled up like a bagel," and you said it was so ordinary, that kids played with similar things today. I could see it in my head, the bagel dog, sleeping in my hand with my fingers folded over it. I wondered how the Egyptians played the game-- for instance, how many players? And did they fight over the pieces? *I want to be the dog!* Like in Monopoly, Anthony and Michael fight over the car but no one wants to be the thimble. Probably, this piece got separated from the game, got lost until some Egyptian baby found it under the table and tried to swallow it and his mother had to put her finger in his mouth to get it out like I did when Michael was a baby and ate a Lego and I snapped at Anthony, *stop leaving those choke-brick esophagus blocks lying around*. Maybe Egyptian

mothers said *stop leaving those choke-stone esophagus plugs around*. Poor little blue sleeping dog. More than just a thing you choke on. Maybe someday there will be a Lego in a museum. I think this choking hazard will be a problem forever.

When we got to my sister's house, I realized we were underdressed and that Anthony and Michael were the only boys. All the other guests were little girls wearing fairy wings, tulle and tiaras, cone-shaped princess hats that looked like pink dunce caps. My sons stood in the middle of it, Anthony in a Bruins jersey with dark circles under his eyes from seasonal allergies, hives on his neck from dairy allergies, and Michael with a red ring around his mouth from Spaghetti-O's.

"Couldn't you have dressed them up?" my sister said. She handed me a slice of cake and proceeded to explain to me how much everything cost. I told the boys to go play and then sat down. Anthony wandered off but Michael lingered, wanting to be included in the adult conversation, wanting to sit in my lap but sliding off.

"Sit next to me," I said but he didn't want it and started to fuss. "I'm sorry but you can't fit." He hit me in the belly. Karen took him away by the arm and angry-spoke to him in the corner until he was trembling from trying not to cry. I felt as if I should rescue him but I looked away, towards a horde of little girls running through the room shrieking. Anthony chased them with a whiffle bat. There was pink frosting on his sleeve and a cheese stick in his hand. I couldn't get out of the couch quickly enough to grab him so I stood in the middle of the room, waiting for him to come through again. Karen decided this was a good time to bring Michael over.

"Go ahead," she said, looking down at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, breaking into tears. "I'm sorry."

The girls ran through again like a herd of prey and Anthony after them, cheese in his mouth and cupcake in hand, a crepe streamer across his chest like a finish line. I caught him by the back of the shirt.

"Did I hurt the baby?" Michael wailed.

"Of course not," I said, ripping the cheese stick from Anthony's mouth. I tried to take the cupcake but he scalped the entire mound of icing before I could get it.

"Hug it out," Karen said, nudging Michael toward me. I embraced him with one arm while I continued to struggle with Anthony.

"I'm sorry Karen, we need to go." Hearing that, Anthony resisted me even more, yelling that he didn't want to, he was having fun, pulling away from me so hard I thought he'd dislocate his own arm. The hives had spread to his face. As I wrestled with him, Michael hung on my shirt and snapped several threads in the seam. *Moooom, Moooom,* he whined in prolonged syllables. I took his hands off me and he collapsed on the floor, emitting a long, wolfish wail. Anthony slackened too, turned to dead weight so I couldn't pull him anywhere.

"Boys," Karen said. "Boys! Why don't you take first pick of the goody bags?"

The goody bags turned out to be plastic bags containing live fish. We left my sister's house with two new pets.

"I'm going to name mine Sam," Anthony said.

"Me too," Michael said as I buckled him into the carseat. "I'm going to name mine Sam too."

"No, you can't copy me. Mom."

I ignored them, removed the bottle of Benadryl from my bag and handed a dose to Anthony.

"I want some," Michael said.

"You don't need any."

"Why does he get to have it and I don't?" The fit was imminent.

"Fine." I gave him a dose too. Mother of the year, I am.

They continued to argue about the fish names as I drove home. I don't suppose you care,

T. Did Egyptian children act like this? Like such brats when their kohl-wearing fathers and barechested mothers broke clay vessels by throwing them at each other? Did their mothers ever wade into the Nile, and think that of all the places to kill yourself, this would be a good place?

Mothers can't think like this for long; someone or something else always gets to die first: "He stabbed my fish! He stabbed it!"

I looked in the mirror and saw Anthony holding a pen like a knife, Michael wet and purple in the face.

"Where is it?"

"He's flopping!" Michael screamed. "He's flopping!"

"Get him," I said, groping behind me for the slimy thing.

"I can't reach!"

"Unbuckle."

"I can't!"

"Anthony, get the damn fish."

"I can't reach either," he said, leaning back in his seat. He ran his finger over his own fish bag and let the cruel thing play out. Michael's screams built until the lines on the road wavered in my vision. I pulled onto the highway shoulder; someone blew a horn. "Where is it?" I said, turning around in my seat. Michael was silent. He pointed at the floor on Anthony's side.

"He's not flopping anymore," Michael said, "Because he's dead now."

It lay there, eye open, in the drained bag. Still. Inside me, the baby was also still. If she were dead, she would look like this. Eyes open but not seeing, mouth parted but not breathing. Perfectly formed but not living, and I always worry that she is dead when she is not moving.

I got out of the car. "Goddamn it!" I yelled, throwing the dead thing in the woods. "Goddamn it!" I almost fainted, but the baby shifted.

"It's okay," I heard Anthony say to Michael. "We can share this fish."

I swear, T, that Jack and I loved each other at some point. Who knows when it started or stopped, whether it faded or dropped off, left or died. But I know of a time when we did, when we were in college, it was winter, and though the night had to have started somewhere earlier, it starts, in my memory, on the balcony. Jack's balcony on the fourteenth floor of his building. The moon was almost full, not quite, the rest of the sky congested with clouds; the night was thinking of snowing. We leaned over the balcony, said if you wanted to kill yourself, yes, this would be a good place to do it.

He walked me home and the way was icy. We caught each other several times, but fell more. By the time we got to my house, the streetlights were going out and Jack asked if I was tired. I didn't want to go in, no, I wasn't tired, so we continued walking, right past my front door. At the time, I thought we didn't know where we were going but it turned out only I didn't know. Jack had a place in mind, a small bakery with unfortunate cafeteria chairs. We shared a slice of quiche and coffee so hot my tongue felt raw the rest of the wind-loud morning we spent whispering for some reason and drawing on the same napkin.

I swear also that my sons are good boys when Jack and I allow them to be. They are just not my good boys. I read your last letter, the only one in which you didn't talk about artifacts, the one where you told Jes you deserved an answer. Yes you do, and I picked a fight with Jack because I deserve something too, but in the middle of it, while he was pointing in my face and my sons were listening with their ears pressed to our bedroom door, I realized that Jes is never going to write you and I began to cry. I'm sorry, I said to Jack, it's hormones, though it wasn't, and I say I'm sorry to you, T, I'm so sorry about Jes, but that's not it either. You put such ideas in my head and I cannot afford a secret friend, telling me always what I deserve. There will be many more times when I have to cry to get myself out of Jack's hate, so that he'll say he forgives me. There will be a time soon when this baby is born and Jack claims her. She better learn to breathe out of water if she hopes to survive.

I didn't really need to tell you all of that just to explain why I opened your letters. I could've just said I was nosy, sorry. I could've just said nothing, not sorry. I don't know if I am. Have I done a bad thing? You wrote these letters because you wanted Jes to read them but Jes gave you a wrong address and doesn't care about you, doesn't want to hear from you, probably doesn't like Ancient Egyptian history anymore, but I do. You taught me about the scarab, how the Egyptians saw a couple of dung beetles at work and decided that we owed the progression of our days to such insects. So the big scarab in the sky continues to push our shitball of a sun around and we get older. Do my sons have industrious little beetles? Every time I blink, one of them has a birthday and yet, the sun hasn't set once on me and Jack; forever, we are stuck in this day.

I can see you reading this, even now as I write it. Perhaps you are a server at a bar and you've just finished up the closing shift. You're on your way home, it's almost three in the morning wherever you are-- your return addresses are always different-- and the car smells funny, like gas, or perhaps the emissions need a check-up. You stop at the mailbox because you have a feeling that today, while you were emptying cups of ice and liquor residue into the slop bucket, carrying trays overhead, coins ringing in your apron, today the mailman delivered a response from Jes. Inside, you find a large yellow envelope, filled with sheets of your handwriting, seals torn, words read over. There is one letter that you didn't write and as you read it, half in, half out of your car, you begin to wonder when you fell asleep and you realize that there was no Jes, there was no one else, and that you were writing to me the whole time.