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Headland Concessions

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

### Headland Concessions

By HG Gruebmeier

Headland Concessions follows a central transmasculine character Skye, as they seek to find a new family. A novel in stories told through the both Skye's point of view and each member of Skye's immediate family, Headland Concessions explores the limits of the in between, and what we must give up to stay precisely where we are.

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# HEADLAND CONCESSIONS

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A STORY IN PARTS

HG Gruebmeyer



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“We become the stories we tell about ourselves.”  
- Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World*

“It’s a blessing: every day someone shows up at the fence. And when no one shows up, a different kind of blessing. In the wrong light anyone can look like a darkness.”  
- Richard Siken, *The War of the Foxes*

## DOUBLING BACK

Skye

2005

A fox that returns to a covert after having left is said to double back.

---

I call my Mother the day the cat dies.

“He’s been sick for weeks,” I tell her.

She does not speak for a moment, but I can hear her nod.

“Do you think he got poisoned in the apartment?” I ask.

Our cat growing up, Oliver, died after eating three poinsettia leaves off the plant my grandmother sends each year.

“He definitely could’ve gotten into something,” my mother says. “Do you keep the cabinet doors child-locked?”

“He’s a cat, not a baby.”

“You never know.”

There’s a faint simmering in the background and I wonder if she’s grilling peaches on the stove, like she does every whenever the first batch comes in from Florida mid-March.

“You know, your father just got a new job,” she says. “It’s not a huge raise, but enough, we could fly you out here for spring break.”

I let the words sit for a moment. I cradle the phone between my ear and my shoulder as I walk to the kitchen. Garrett’s left our kitchen window open and shouts echo up from the street below. We live over a Romanian bakery, and I can tell they’ve turned the ovens on. I

put the phone on the counter and push up the glass. The world outside smells like burnt cranberries and heat.

I pick the phone up and return it to my ear.

“I don’t see why not.”

There is a rush of air on her side of the line, like an exhale.

“It’s settled. Can I email you the tickets after I purchase them?”

I give her my email.

“Sunday the fifteenth is best,” I say.

There’s a muffled sound over the line, like she’s bent over to make a note.

We talk for a bit longer. When she hangs up to go to lunch, I put the phone back in its plastic cradle. I lean against the kitchen counter, curling my fingers to the brittle wood underneath.

Garrett should be home soon; he took a half day on account of me finding the cat dead in the back of my closet this morning. The phone rings again. I answer, thinking it’s my mother, but the line cuts off a few seconds after I do.

In the three years after I moved to New York, Mom hasn’t offered to fly me home once. We tried the first Christmas, but the tickets were too expensive on top of my tuition. I ended up spending the holiday alone. A friend from class asked if I could keep an eye on her parents’ house in Montauk over the break. They were going to Florida and needed someone to water the plants and feed her cats, so I agreed. On Christmas morning, I made myself breakfast before biking to the lighthouse and walking on the beach. It was nice, just cold.

I’m sure my room in Montana looks the same as the day I left. The old TV and VCR my dad got me when I was in ninth grade. All the dust built up on my nightstand. Clean

circles underneath the vases of fake lilies, a flower my mother insists I loved as a child, on my desk.

I think about opening the window next to my old bed. A swell of dry western air and the scent of wildfire. Heavy double paned glass banging against aged vinyl siding. A pulsing through the valley. Like a heartbeat, familiar and unrelenting.

...

Garrett suggests we bury the cat on Long Island, not far from where he grew up. He was more Garrett's than mine. He had actually taken care of him since we'd found him in the empty apartment when we moved in. He didn't have a name for a while, but then Garrett took to calling him 'Harry' short for 'The Only Inheritance We'd Ever Get.' Garrett wasn't close with his family either.

In the car, I turn when Garrett requests. The pull off is just a few picnic tables, a sparse bit of grass.

"Are we doing it right here?" I ask.

"I can't think of anywhere else."

I take the toy shovel we use for our potted plants and start digging into the cracked late-winter ground, brushing away chunks of snow as I go.

"How deep does this have to be?" I ask.

Garrett leans back on one of the picnic tables and fishes a cigarette out of his pocket.

"Just enough to cover the lid of the box."

I nod and turn back to my work.

I'd really liked Harry. He was orange with these spots of white across his chest and nose like freckles. Even though Garrett fed him, he was always waiting in my bed for me

when I came home. After my performances, he'd knead his paws into my lap while I sat on my bed taking off my makeup and unbinding my chest. When I laid down to go to sleep, he stood on my chest and looked at me expectantly, as if I'd forgotten something.

I have two cats in Montana, but they were devoted to my mother. I never considered having an animal of my own until I moved in with Garrett. Neither of us were particularly good parents, but he likes to joke we run a 'Mom and Pop joint' when we have friends over for dinner. We both know he's Mom and me, Pop.

"Are you finished yet?" he asks from his position smoking on the picnic table.

The hole I'd dug was barely deep enough, but the play shovel wasn't enough for me to keep going through the frozen soil and rock.

"This is probably it," I say.

He nods and takes the shoebox out of the backseat. He kneels next to me before lowering the box the feeble six inches I dug into the earth. Garrett begins to scoop the frozen bits of black dirt into his hand, crunching it into the shape of his fist, then sprinkling it over the box.

"Like they do at real funerals," he says, as if I should've already known.

I nod and copy him.

It's dark by the time we drive home. Garrett's in the passenger seat, his head pressed against the window, fogged up from the cold outside. He's awake but I know he doesn't want to speak to me. In the entire time we've been friends, we've only spent one week apart, a Christmas he'd spent with his Dad.

After I moved to New York and my Mother's calls trickled down to once a week, I figured that was it. They never made any plans to visit and I was happy enough not paying

for flights home for holidays. There was always a distance anyway. My Dad tried to take an interest in what I liked, watched old movies with me when he got weekends off, but Mom stopped trying after a certain point.

My Dad has always told me that they'd tried hard to have me. They visited various doctors they couldn't afford. It took five years, but she found out she was pregnant right after my brother's sixth Christmas. She asked the ultrasound technician twice to make sure I was a girl. She named me Skye, after a childhood friend of hers who drowned when they were seven. Dad said she liked how, no matter where she was, she was tangled in some bit of me. Before me, they had almost given up trying to have another child. Their marriage turned rocky for a bit and my father almost left. My parents aren't religious, but my father always claimed I was nothing short of a miracle.

"Proof," I imagine them saying to each other before I was born. "This child feels like proof."

...

Often, I forget what I look like after a show. Half my makeup melted and my eyebrows peeling off at the edges. Myself and not myself at the same time. I take a towel from the makeup table and run it under warm water. Once I see steam, I press it against my left eyebrow to dissolve the adhesive.

"Hey Skye! Have you seen that extra crate of gin?" Simone calls from behind the bar.

I find her cross legged on the floor, the thick soles of her restaurant shoes grazing the inside of her thighs.

"Hey, no, I haven't done the sweep yet. Been taking off my makeup," I reply.

She looks up at me, laughs, “you have one eyebrow.”

“I’m gonna crowd test it soon.”

She smirks, lifts herself off the floor. We made out once, freshman year, and I remember she smelled like black coffee and cigars. It didn’t match. She’s small, with a pink pixie cut, long on the sides, so that bubblegum slips of hair graze her ears. But somehow when we kissed, she reminded me of my father on Sunday evenings.

“You’re going home tomorrow?” she says.

There’s a small piece of glitter stuck on the inside corner of both of her eyes.

I nod, “just for a few weeks.”

“You’re from where again?” she says, begins cleaning the counter with a frayed cloth rag.

“Montana.”

“How,” she pauses, smiles, “cowboy.”

“Yeah, something like that,” I say, picking a small crumb off the counter.

“Close with your family?”

“Not really.”

She doesn’t respond for a moment. On the street outside, cars drive slowly across the ice. Headlights flash inside, briefly illuminating the metal chairs stacked on tables. The sticky floor is flecked with pieces of glitter. Before it was a drag club, this was a Greek restaurant. Sometimes at the end of the night, you can still smell the falafel behind the bar. That’s where the fryers were. I turn to go. Simone grabs my arm, her nails are painted bright pink.



“At least we’ll be here when you get back,” she says. “You’ll always have” she moves her eyebrows suggestively, “da’ club.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Hey, wrangle something for me!” she yells out after me.

“Will do!” I say over my shoulder.

I decide to get Chinese for Garrett on the way home. I pull my winter coat over my shoulders and find a small hole in the right elbow. It’s old, made of thick wool with big buttons. I bought it in Bozeman, two weeks before Christmas. The store clerk asked to gift wrap it, and I let her. When my mother found it stashed in the backseat of my car, she hid it in the attic. I didn’t find it again until I was packing to leave. I didn’t ask her about it. Just put it in my trunk when I left for school and moved on.

Outside, the sidewalk is a thick slab of ice. Across the street, the light turns red. Each person I pass on the street blushes under the glow. I do not meet their eyes. This is my favorite time in the city, when everyone feels anonymous. Their stories quietly intertwined with mine. A man with a thick orange beard walks two small dogs on pink leashes. A girl I vaguely recognize from class walks with two of her friends. They all wear green army jackets, big scarves, and wool beanies pulled over their buzzcuts. A tall woman in high stilettos and a short leopard print skirt walks quickly, pulls her purse close as she passes me. An early spring wind blows up the street and I zip my jacket. Dig my hands deeper in my pockets.

...

When I get home, Garrett's watching TV on the couch. His legs stretched out to reach the small coffee table in front of him. Wearing only a pair of plaid boxers and an oversized Smiths t-shirt. His curly black hair sticks up in the back.

I place the takeout on the counter and take a few plates down from the cabinet.

"You want chopsticks?" I call out.

He turns around to face me. He's stoned. His eyes are pink at the edges and his movements slow. .

"You got noodles?" he asks.

"Yeah, didn't feel like cooking tonight," I say, putting a scoop of veggie lo-mein on both our plates.

I sit down next to him, hand him the plate and a pair of chopsticks.

"You're the best," he says and takes a bite. Chews for a moment before asking, "How was the show?"

"It was good, not that many people came tonight. Probably the weather," I say.

On the television, the Powerpuff Girls fly around a godzilla monster ravenging the city. Garrett takes another bite, balances the plate on his lap.

"When's your flight tomorrow again?"

"Early, five thirty I think." I say. "I need to pack tonight."

Garrett gets up, placing his plate on the table before walking to the kitchen. I hear him turn on the tap before calling out, "you want some water?"

"Yeah, thanks."

As Buttercup smashes the Godzilla with a mallet, a small moth buzzes at the edge of the screen before moving to the light fixture by the shelves. It's body is pale green, like the underside of a leaf.

Garrett comes back into the room with two mugs of water. He hands one to me, then settles back into the couch. The mugs are bright yellow with gaudy, pop art cows on the sides. His mother gave them to us when we moved in. She found them in a thrift store in Vermont, where she moved when she split with Garrett's dad.

We sit in silence for a while, watching the girls talk about the tooth that Blossom lost the day before. Garrett finishes his lo mein and returns the plate to the coffee table in front of him before reaching over and putting his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm going to miss you," he says.

The moth moves back to the edge of the TV. Its wings are gorgeous, intricate with thin intersecting veins, like the strings of a spider's web.

"It's only two weeks. You'll survive."

"Guess I'll have to find a new boyfriend in the meantime," he says, raising his eyebrows.

"I'm the best you'll ever have," I say.

"Of course."

"Gross," I say.

I pick up the plates and glasses, return them to the kitchen. On the television, I hear one of the Powerpuff girls scream, the sound followed by a big cartoon crash.

"What about, what's his name, Felix or whatever?" I ask, settling back into the couch.

Garrett picks at a piece of lint on his boxers. I can smell vanilla from the candle he burns in his room when he has guys over. Wonder if he expects one tonight.

“He never called me after that night in Chelsea. You know his real name was Fredrick? I saw it on his license.”

“Hm, sounds pretentious.”

“He was,” Garrett says and taps my knee with his index finger. “That’s why he didn’t call me back.”

“That’s it for sure.”

“You know once you leave, I won’t be afraid to bring guys over here every single night. You’re the only reason I’ve been holding back. Want you to be able to sleep at least a few nights a week,” he says and looks around the room, as if assessing the foundation.

“These walls are very thin.”

“Well, I’m going to get out of your hair as soon as possible,” I say, standing up to go to my room.

“You haven’t been home in a while,” Garrett says, his voice lower, heavy in a way I don’t recognize.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m fine.”

He nods, apprehensive.

We haven’t talked about Harry since we buried him on Friday. I don’t bring him up but I know Garrett misses him. We haven’t moved his food bowl, and neither one of us wants to be the one to do it.

In the corner, the moth buzzes against our lamp again and again. Something naive in its movements. A black dot on each of its wings like a dab of ink. I turn to head to my room

and Garrett settles back into the couch. I'll miss waking up to his coffee. He says he likes it the way it is at diners, with grounds at the bottom. We go through a bag of Folgers a week.

I sit on my bed. T-shirts, jeans, and sweatshirts are strewn across the floor, falling off hangers in the closet. I pick up the iron tin Jaime gave me. It's the size of a deck of cards, the color of the sky right before a storm. There's no decoration beside a thick swatch of white paint across the center. She found it at Goodwill, then used her pocket knife to engrave our initials on the base. She intended it for Polaroids, but it's too narrow. I taped the photos on the wall and the tin sits empty on my nightstand.

I haven't seen Jaime since she visited two years ago. Her mom bought the ticket as a birthday present, but when she came, it was awkward, the distance already built up. I was living in the dorms, so we had to share my twin bed. On her last morning, I woke up to her curled up on the floor with only a pillow and a thin knit blanket.

As I pick out the last few t-shirts to pack, I remind myself that everything will be the same when I return. On the street below, a car honks and someone tells the driver to fuck off. I move closer to the window, push it open. My apartment is three flights up. The air is choked with smog and sweat. In the den, I hear Garrett turn off the TV.

...

I borrow Garrett's walkman for the plane. The only cassettes he has are mixes made for him by ex-boyfriends that include a lot of Cher and Dolly Parton, but I don't mind. I pull my hood up and close my eyes. The man next to me breathes deeply. The flight attendant comes down the aisle, asking everyone to put up the trays on the backs of the seats. This is the first time I've gone home in three years. When I left, it felt like a splitting of skin. Like I

could walk into the world as someone else. And I did. I don't know how to be the person I once was. I put my hands in the pockets of my jacket and try to sleep.

...

Between Bozeman and Logan, Montana, I swerve to avoid a dead fox in the center of the road. The car jostles onto rocky gravel, stalls, then comes to a full stop on the highway shoulder. The fox's head pulls away from its torso, mangled and strewn in pieces across the yellow center lines. The rest of its body presses into the soft cement, its fur caked in blood. A few stray hairs blow like stalks of wheat in the gentle breeze.

I touch my forehead against the steering wheel and take a few deep breaths. The fox's dismembered body stretches across both lanes. I edge forward, try not to hit my bumper on the rounded shoulder and drive away.

When I was ten, my father took me fox hunting at the reservoir near our house. I liked being with my father then. He never minded my shyness, just turned the radio up so we didn't have to talk. We were crouched in a small patch of trees that bordered the beach, when he spotted a fox and nudged me, motioning towards the water. The animal was small, more like a teenager than fully grown, and didn't see us, just kept looping over and under the fallen driftwood. My Dad hoisted the gun square on my thin shoulder, and I put my right eye behind the scope. The shot came quicker than I expected, my small body thrown backwards by the force of the blast. I closed my eyes; but I can still remember the sound the fox made when the bullet hit. A small, short yelp. My father's eyes. The pool of blood on the beach. An eager mixture with the waves.

...

As I drive up my parents' long driveway, the sun sets west of the mountains. The remaining light drifts across the plains, with small blossoms of pink catching like wet flower petals against the shrinking horizon.

...

I knock on my front door, like when I was a kid and my brother had locked me out of the house. Soon, my mother's skirt blurs in the stained glass insert. The door is heavy and she struggles pulling it over our thick carpet. White eyeshadow sits in heavy creases around her eyes, and spare flecks of glitter fall down her face, forming interstices between darkening age spots. She looks tired.

"I'm so glad you're home," she says and moves toward me with her arms outstretched,

I'm four inches taller than her, and when we hug, I taste hairspray. Pushing me away from her chest, she presses her palms flat against my shoulders.

"I wish you'd let that hair grow," she says.

"I cut it last month. Actually grown out a little since then."

She reaches out and tenderly brushes the side of my head. I know what she's looking for: the scar above my left ear. I got it when I was five. My brother pushed me off the top of the iron slide behind our old house. I had to get four stitches and buzz my head on that side, cut the rest short to match. I wanted to keep my hair short forever. I had never recognized myself in mirrors before.

"Why don't you bring your stuff inside, and then we can have some coffee by the fire," she says.

The house looks crowded. There's more framed photos of my brothers and me on the walls, more fishing magazines stacked up on the counter, an extra bed for the cats by my Dad's armchair.

"I'm gonna take a shower first, if you don't mind."

"I wish your father was here to help you lug that trunk out of your car. I don't know why you still use that thing," she says, holding the door open for me to come inside.

"I'll grab it," I say, and turn back toward the car, pulling my jacket tighter around my waist.

On the front porch, a white streak of cloud dissects the yellowing sky. The mountains, nearly forty miles away, carve up out of the valley like baby teeth jolted loose. Below me, the valley melts. Water gathers around small indents in the earth - each abandoned truck or rotting fence post. This used to be my favorite time at home. Bright green bits of grass start to push out of the snow.

...

When I come back downstairs, my mother sits with her legs tucked under her, reading a homeware magazine by the fireplace. Thin reading glasses perch on the tip of her nose.

"Hey honey, how was your shower?" she says and returns her feet to the floor.

"Good. I think I'm going to go see Jaime for a little while. She called," I say, and rub a towel against my wet hair.

Small pills of water bury into the dark blue couch, and my mother looks up at me. I forgot about the coffee. In the kitchen, the kettle whistles, a thin rope of steam blowing toward the windows.



“Your father’s not home yet,” she says and looks around, as if he’s hiding somewhere in the living room.

My father usually gets off the ranch around nine or ten, and returns smelling of salt and fertilizer. In the kitchen, his chicken and peas sit covered by a thick layer of plastic wrap. For a while, my mother refused to make my father dinner if he never planned on joining us. He began to drink four beers instead of eating, she returned to leaving plates on the stove with heating instructions.

“I’ll stay for one coffee, if you want,” I say.

Dolly, our tabby cat climbs into my mother’s lap, her fur the color of mottled bricks.

“No, you go. I’ll make tea instead, go to bed early,” my mother says.

“Are you sure?” I ask, reach out to pat Dolly on the head.

“Yes, but be back by eleven,” she says, and offers up her right cheek for a kiss, I grant it.

“Sure Mom,” I say and grab my jacket off the hook by the front door. “I love you.”

“Be safe.”

I close the door.

...

In the bar, huddles of old cowboys stand around talking about the early snowmelt or silently play pool with huge pitchers of beer balanced on table edges. The air is thick and steady, with sudden bursts of cold wind whenever someone walks in. I scan the room, searching the weathered faces for a flicker of familiarity, but I don’t recognize anyone.

The bartender’s eyes switch from my shirt to my hair to my chest, and I can see him picking me apart, unsure how to address me. Beside me, two boys around my age hug,

slapping each other's backs. Setting my bag under my seat, I catch the bartender's eye again and order a beer. His expression relaxes, my femininity now set and decided in his mind.

"Skye!" Jaime's voice breaks through the low hum, "I didn't recognize you."

Jamie's thinner than the last time I saw her, the dark circles around her eyes deep and prominent. I allow myself to wonder if I look different to her.

Last week on the subway, I ran into a girl I dated freshman year, Jess. She always had a smudge of lipstick on her teeth and wore her denim jacket around her shoulders instead of putting her arms through the sleeves. As we sat on the sticky plastic bench, I commented on how she'd bleached her hair, on the small piercings like a marble cupped in each dimple.

When I stood up for my stop, Jess caught my wrist and said, "You look handsome Skye. It suits you."

I thought about it for the rest of the day. Before I went to sleep that night, I thought about sending Jess an email. I wanted to thank her, but worried she would misinterpret the message, so I decided against it.

"It's recent, just a few months ago, I think," I say to Jaime, but my voice gets lost.

Someone puts 'Eye of the Tiger' on the jukebox and everyone groans. Jaime leans over the bar and orders a beer for herself. I adjust my t-shirt around my shoulders. The bartender flirts with Jaime, compliments her earrings. She smiles, asks if she can get the beer for free. He agrees.

"I like it on you," she says. "The hair."

"Thanks."

The bartender turns around and pulls the small curtains on the windows shut. They have tiny pink and yellow daisies on them, and remind me of a set of sheets I had as a kid.

“So how long are you hanging around?” she asks.

“Just a couple of weeks. I have a presentation the third week of March I can’t miss.” I say and shift in my seat, flattening my palms on the sticky bar countertop.

“We have a lot to accomplish then. The guys should be meeting us here soon.”

“Which guys?” I ask.

“Oh you know, the same old,” she says and looks away. Her eyes settle on a guy leaned over a pool table, his boxers slightly peeking out of his jeans.

I take a sip of my beer. In the corner of the room, a neon sign flashes “Cowboys” but only one letter is illuminated at a time. The lights in the second O are burned out.

“Come on, you’ll have fun. One night it’ll be just us, I promise. Like old times,” she says. Her eyes soften and her pale brown lashes blown golden in the dim light.

“Okay, I’m going to the bathroom, I’ll be right back,” I stand up, swinging my backpack over my shoulders.

The door shut behind me, I close my eyes and inhale. The swollen air gathers in my lungs, then tumbles out in big, bulky heaps.

The first time Jaime and I ever had sex was in her car parked behind the bar. She said she wanted to go outside to smoke, but pulled me into her back seat, gripping my sweatshirt with both hands. It was early winter, and heavy beads of ice stretched down the car windows. When we were finished, she pressed her lips against my earlobe and made me promise never to tell anyone. That was the same night both my car headlights burned out. I remember how dark it was all the way home, my tires carving slow, careful tracks in the snow.

...

At the sink, I splash cold water on my face before opening the bathroom door. On the other side of the bar, two girls sit in the corner of the room, leaning against the wall. One is short with a bleached buzz cut. The other is leaner, with bangs that fall in her eyes. Their fingers are interlaced and rest on the taller girl's lap.

It strikes me that I must look like them when I go out with girls in New York. The thought settles uncomfortably in my stomach. As I close the bathroom door, the shorter girl reaches up and tucks her girlfriend's hair behind her ear. She smirks, like it's an inside joke between them. The girlfriend smiles but looks away, to a group of guys playing pool near the jukebox. I follow her gaze and recognize it. Not admiration or attraction but longing. The girlfriend sits up straighter in her seat. I cross my arms over my chest and walk away.

...

People keep showing up, and Jaime knows all of them. Boys from town just getting off work at the beef packing plant. Girls I vaguely remember from high school who ask me about New York in detached voices, each syllable wound tight, like stale gum. Ranchers, nearly forty years older than us, whose wives sit at home with children worrying about the roads to get to school in the morning. As I drink, the bar's thin wooden walls begin to sink in towards me and with each new arrival, I inch closer to Jaime. By midnight, the feet of our stools cross over one another on the floor.

"I told my Mom eleven, and I think it's past twelve. What are you feeling?" I ask.

"Well, that guy over there," she says and points to a boy our age with a deep red sunburn and a bright silver belt buckle. "He always has the best weed, and he invited us to the lake."

I exhale, stretching my arms out in front of me.

“You sure it’s the best?” raising my eyebrows.

She tugs on the bottom of my shirt so my collar goes crooked.

“The absolute best.”

“I’ll drive,” I say.

“You always do,” Jaime says and smiles, her high cheeks flushed pink.

“With your record, how could I not?” I say, standing up. “Arrive alive, right?”

The guy in front of us holds open the bar door, an unlit cigarette hanging from his lips.

“It was one time with one cop. You can’t hold that against me,” she says, and wraps her arm around my waist.

“I think I would arrest you too if you threw up on my shoes,” I say, and throw my arm around her shoulders.

“Please. Forgive,” she says, and kisses my cheek.

I hate how easy it feels, coming back.

“The stars are pretty tonight,” Jaime says.

She stretches her head backwards and rests it on my arm behind her.

I click my car unlocked, and weave out of her arms.

“Forgiven. Always,” I say, opening the passenger door for her. “Is that guy going to follow us?”

“Yeah he’s right behind you, I told him what kind of car.”

I put the key in the ignition.

“Skye,” she says, looking over at me, her eyes sleepy and dark.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re home.”

Behind us, someone flashes their headlights, filling the car with light. A coyote barks in the distance.

“You know I miss you,” I admit, tightening my hands around the steering wheel.

“I miss you too,” she leans out of her seat and rests her head in my lap, “even right now.”

The streetlamps create small patches of brightness on her face, highlighting her brow, her high cupid's bow, the freckles on her chest. I think about placing my forefinger on her lips, the thick, swollen part where they meet in the center. Whether she would open her mouth. Wrap her tongue around my finger. Dig her teeth gently into my skin.

“I hope the lake isn’t frozen over,” I say, and pull out of the parking lot.

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The moon is a halved grapefruit on the still lake. Jaime and her friend, whose name I learn is David, are smoking in his jeep. I unlace my boots and leave them by the picnic tables at the edge of the beach. My feet sink into the grains of smooth black rock. My dad told me that they brought these stones up from Yellowstone in the seventies. The state government was out of money and selling volcanic rock on the outskirts of the park for cheap.

I light my cigarette and try to find the point where the water is consumed by the lip of the horizon. Often, in New York, when I’m waiting for the subway, or I can’t fall asleep, I find myself thinking about the men who built this reservoir. Their muscles bulging under the weight of the large beams they used to hold up the dam.

I think about moving away to Montreal or Newfoundland. Becoming a laborer. Strain my muscles carrying crates of fish. Take time to read on my lunch break. How I might buy a

boat, go sailing on the weekends. I imagine a surge of sea. White knuckles curled around thick rope.

Jaime closes the car door. I don't turn, but listen to her footsteps breaking into the quiet hush of sand. She sits next to me and lays her head on my shoulder. Her fingers travel up my shirt, circling and drawing shapes in-between my shoulder blades, held taut with tension. She doesn't speak. Neither do I. The waves lap on our toes, bare naked and glowing in the pale light.

In the distance, a car alarm whelps, a mother wakes to tend her baby, a trucker orders his last drink at the bar.

A warped section of guardrail leans over the lake on the other side and casts shadows across the water. I hear David, in the car, cough. I place my thumb on the side of Jaime's cheek. I kiss her and a hole opens up underneath my body. I kiss her and headlights flash on the other side of the lake. I kiss her and my eyes are still open.

I see a couple in a car parked on the beach, twenty yards away. I can't make out much, just outlines. The woman shifts seats, straddles her boyfriend on the drivers side.

Jaime pulls away and begins kissing my neck. I place my hands on either side of her waist, pulling her on top of me. Her knees dig into the sand, as she moves her hips up and down, her hands pulling through my hair. I kiss her, and the streetlamps switch off. I reach under her shirt, press my palm flat against her chest. She pulls her shirt over her shoulders. I kiss the space between her breasts and her heartbeat echoes in my ears.

## DRAG HUNT

Garrett

2004

A drag hunt is one in which the carcass of the fox of a previous hunt is used to establish the line of scent.

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We met at work a few months before I dropped out of school. I was going to FIT and hating every minute of it. There were too many pretentious boys who weren't interested, too many black dress coats with sneakers. I went to class three days a week and cleaned houses on the rest.

Skye was new and Rhonda, the vaguely Eastern European woman who ran the agency, stuck us together on the McMillan job on the upper east side. The apartment was beautiful, with floor to ceiling windows and marble countertops. Each week when I walked in, I imagined the house was mine. I wanted to get fucked bent over those counters. They were the perfect height.

I told Skye this as we walked in and she nodded, but didn't say anything. She wore a huge black sweater tucked into her jeans and chunky black boots that laced up the front. She didn't say much of anything that first day. I shrugged it off, figured she was shy. She kept putting her hands in the pockets of her huge 501s, hunching her shoulders over. We cleaned, folded clothes, rearranged shoes on the rack, made a mint pesto all in silence.



We finished around seven, the sunset sinking beneath the cover of the buildings. It was cold for March, but I only had on my denim jacket and the last clean black sweater from my closet. Skye brought this Carhartt monstrosity, all canvas and corduroy, the kind of jacket an aging farmer would wear. We talked about school. She said she was studying film, and that she wanted to write screenplays eventually. I told her about FIT, my stupid dreams to be a designer.

“I would start with a line that was just horrible, I’m telling you, extremely camp. Something even Britney wouldn’t wear to like, the MTV Video Awards, and then I’d ‘grow up’ in the fashion scene, but still have the cool edge from the first line, until I was known as this incredibly chic but outsider too, like Mugler,” I said, sucking in cold air through the gap in my teeth.

“What could possibly be too camp for Britney?” she said.

She looked my way for a second, a rare smile.

We fell in love within a matter of weeks. Neither one of us could imagine sleeping with the other - that was the beauty of it. She started bringing me coffee after class. I’ve never met anyone who was so unbothered by traffic or strangers. Everyone wanted to talk to her. Tired working-Mom-types would strike up a conversation about the weather, or the lasting impact of 9/11 on the city’s morale and Skye would end up in their apartment. I got fed up after a minute of talking about the lack of oranges in the bodegas, but Skye always looked people in the eyes. Something about her got people talking. That’s how we got so close. She never made me shut up.

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One day in May, I told school I wouldn't be taking my exams or returning for my fall classes. I just made up my mind about it. No one took anyone's else's designs seriously and I was tired of walking thirty minutes on my lunch break for decently priced cigarettes. After I wrote my last email, I went over to Skye's dorm with two bottles of gin and four hard limes. She stole her roommate's tonic water from the fridge and we sat on the roof. It was unfinished, just gray concrete and a brick wall. If it was clear, you could see all the way to the Hudson. That night was cloudy, each streetlamp a blurry bit of light. Car horns echoed from below, but we were otherwise alone. Our own little world.

“Did you think about quitting?” she asked, taking a sip of her drink. “Or did you just do it?”

She was wearing a huge black t-shirt tucked into a pair of linen trousers I found for her in a thrift store. Her hair was tucked up into a hat even though it wasn't cold. I thought she looked bald, but kept my thoughts to myself.

“I think I just did it,” I said. “I don't know, I didn't feel like I owed myself an explanation.”

She uncrossed her legs, leaned back in the lawn chairs we found on the street in Queens. They had neon pink and green stripes down the center and the plastic was fraying at the sides. I claimed they were vintage and seventies, but Skye said they were trash. Still, no one ever stole them from our spot on the roof.

“That's amazing that you could just do it. I wish I could make decisions like that,” she said.

“What about performing at the club? Not many people I know would get up with duct tape on their bare chest and lip-sync to Johnny Cash.”

She rolled her eyes. Skye didn't talk about the club all that often. For a performer, she was really bad at advertising. She had only invited me to one show, but only because she wanted to borrow a jacket. I was surprised how natural she was on stage, how comfortable she looked. Drag was like her alter ego, one that no one else could touch.

"I did Ring of Fire once and," she said and took a long dramatic sigh. "I regret it every day since."

"You still did it," I said.

"So did you."

"I guess I did," I said.

...

Four months after I dropped out, Grace quit her rehab program and moved in with Skye and me for a while.

My big sister hadn't had a job or a consistent apartment for years. There were boyfriends, but they were just as strung out as she was or worse. Skye and I had only been living together for a few months, but she said she didn't mind. I offered Grace the couch, but Skye insisted on buying a cot and setting up a little makeshift space in our living room. She even hung up some twinkling Christmas lights she found on the street. Half the bulbs were burned out, but Skye didn't care.

"It's about making a good impression," she told me.

The night Grace moved in, we cooked dinner, got sparkling cider from the grocery store on our way home. I made the sauce and Skye was in charge of the pasta. I turned around to check on Grace. I'm not sure what I was afraid of; there wasn't any alcohol in the house. I hadn't seen her in over a year. The distance between us was built up like soap scum.

Skye put her hand on my shoulder.

“Chef, the pasta is al dente”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“It’s exactly where it’s supposed to be.”

Grace was still on the couch, flipping through one of Skye’s poetry books. Raymond Carver. I didn’t know he was a poet too, but Skye swore he was good. I hadn’t gotten around to reading it.

Grace sat with her legs tucked under her, wearing a red sweatshirt I didn’t recognize. Her blond hair bleached and frayed at the ends. Growing up, I was always jealous of her hair, how straight and long it got to be. Dad didn’t mind if hers got in her eyes, but he insisted I get a buzz cut every month. The barber’s shop smelled like cigarettes and ammonia. The men there were gruff, ex-military like my father. I felt so queer with my legs crossed in the barber’s chair, his clammy fingers pushed against the back of my neck.

“Dinner is almost ready.”

Skye drained the spaghetti and put it in the pan with the sauce. She took three plates from the cupboard and divied up the food.

Grace came into the kitchen, smiling limply. It struck me how this felt like playing house. Like none of us really knew which roles we filled in but acted regardless.

The last time Grace and I were together, we were screaming at each other, and she threw a plate at my head. We were fighting over an ex-boyfriend of hers who used to show up at Skye and my apartment unannounced. On that particular night, he broke past me and ran around the apartment, knocking on doors. When I asked him to leave, he’d called me a faggot and spit on my shoes before slamming the door behind him.

Skye handed Grace a bowl, careful to keep the spaghetti from slipping off. She took her own and a bundle of silverware to the coffee table she'd set with a tablecloth and a few tealights. I lingered in the kitchen a moment, watched them sit cross legged on the floor. It was odd to see them together, like a crossover TV show. Skye poured some water into Grace's glass. A few ice cubes pushed against the lip of the pitcher, blocking the current.

When we moved in, Skye bought a lamp at a thrift store a few blocks away and when she brought it home, I realized I had the exact same one in my room as a kid. It was a floor lamp, comprised of a thin black pole and a wide bulb. Something about its shape illuminated the entire room perfectly.

As I watched Skye and Grace sit on the floor under the glow, I realized that for the first time in my life, I felt like my family was together.

...

Grace stayed sober for a few months, went to AA meetings every night before work, put chips in the ashtray on the coffee table. Soon, they shrank like fossils, crusted over with ash and burnt paper. She worked at the diner at the other end of the block, knew one of the kitchen guys from another program, or he was a friend of her ex, I can't remember which.

When she was drinking, Grace was an achiever. She read and played the cello and painted portraits of her friends. She got shit done. Sober, she was lethargic. She came home from the diner at ten, ate whatever leftovers Skye and I had in the fridge. She watched TV or stared at the ceiling. I tried to talk to her but she ignored me.

I worked during the day, so by the time Skye or she got home, I was usually bored, wanted to play cards or watch old movies. But Grace wouldn't stay in the room with me for more than five minutes. If I was in the den, she went into my room, if I was in my room, she

camped out in the den. After a while, I gave up trying. We fell into a routine of not speaking, and then suddenly, we weren't.

...

I took her back to rehab the day after she relapsed. I came home to her sleeping outside the apartment door. She couldn't even knock. I didn't tell Skye, just booked Grace at this center in New Jersey and walked the fifteen blocks to get my car out of the garage. Grace agreed to go, but packed slowly, her long fingers shaking as she folded all of her clothes into an old duffel of our fathers. She had cut her hair a few days before, and colored it bright pink at the tips. As I watched her carry all of her belongings down the stairs, I noticed how frail she looked. Old, almost. She was only two years my senior, but crows feet burgeoned in the corner of her eyes.

"Do you care what we listen to?" I asked once we'd pulled away from the curb in my car.

"Not really," she said and tucked herself further into her lime green overcoat so just the tip of her head was visible.

I turned on the radio, to some college station ironically playing Britney Spears. We sat listening for a while, her rolling down the window every few minutes to blow a thin stream of smoke outside.

"Have you seen Dad recently?" she asked.

We were crossing the bridge. The bay stretched out on both sides beneath us, choked up with dirt and garbage. Dad always said you could die if one drop of water hit your tongue by accident. We were never allowed on boat rides.

My father never talked about the war to us. I figured he must've said something to Mom in the time they were together, but she never mentioned it either. There were weeks when he'd be gone for days at a time. Sometimes weeks. He brought home baseball caps and t-shirts from state parks in New York, Maine, even up to Canada once. I wondered if he drank on those trips, if he slept with women. I wondered if he was lonely.

“No,” I said. “I haven't seen him.”

Not for three years. My father has never met Skye, never seen any of my designs, never met any boyfriends. Sometimes, I imagine that he's gone on another one of his trips, that he's out on a boat in Labrador or on a cold beach in Oregon, in the warm shrunken sun of the Appalachians in North Carolina. I feel young when I think about how little I've seen. New York feels claustrophobic sometimes, like I'm stuck in a video game where I can only make certain moves.

We'd crossed the bridge by then. Sunk into the sprawl of the suburbs, strip malls and fast food chains, men standing under bus stops, looking up at the clouds for rain.

We kept driving. The radio switched stations, to some vague country-pop. I rested my fingers on the dial, turned the volume up. Sunk into the lull of the music, comforted by the predictable twang, the chorus that played over and over. I looked over at Grace, overwhelmed by the urge to touch her, to let her know I was there. But I didn't. Whatever wall we'd built between us stayed intact.

...

The clinic I'd chosen was in a strip mall. Bordered on one side by a Chinese restaurant and the other, the kind of pregnancy clinic that convinces women to not abort their babies. I wondered if my sister or I would ever have children. It seemed unlikely, but I liked

the idea. I can't imagine Skye as a mother, but I could see us together, a long time from now. We'd raise a proper city kid, one that could take the subway by himself by age nine. I wouldn't be a good father, but I'd be better than my own. Maybe we'd move out to the beach eventually. I pictured a green door, a red roof. A house on stilts, protected from the rising tide.

"You don't have to come in with me," Grace said when we pulled up to the curb.

"I want to," I said.

"I've done this before."

A man in a ratty white sweatshirt sat on the curb next to the car, smoking the butt of a cigarette. He looked like a guy I'd dated last year, Andrew. We broke up when he'd cheated on me with a bartender. I cried in my bed for weeks. I saw him two months later, in the bodega closest to my apartment. He was alone, buying a single carton of orange juice.

"That's not the point," I said.

"You aren't coming," she said. She got out of the car and slammed the door. I didn't move, just watched as she kept her head down and went inside.

...

On the drive back, I stopped by the beach, a longer detour, but I didn't have to work until late the next day. It was late October, already getting cold.

I took my sneakers off before wading across the sand. I'd never seen the beach that empty, only a few older couples walking along looking for shells, a few joggers in tight shorts and sports bras. It was low tide, and the retreating water had formed a lip a few feet from the edge of the surf. I sat there for a while and looked for shells around me to bring back for Skye. She was probably getting home from her Modern Literature class by now, the



sun just yellow at the edge of the horizon. It comforted me to think that she was unaware that Grace was gone, that she would unlock the front door and unlace her boots and put the kettle on the stove before she realized anything was different. I wanted nothing more than to go back in time and live in that space, in the utter arrogance of ignorance, with her.

Laid out before me on the blank canvas of sand, I could see all of it, the rest of everything. Me, working in the same dead-end job for years before finally deciding to retire, then moving out alone to Wisconsin or the upstate or something. No partner, no kids.

Skye would slowly work her way up in the film industry until some older executive found her beautiful and her dykey demeanor charming. He would skyrocket her career, but she would have to remain in the body she had now.

She wouldn't admit it to me, but I knew she wanted change. I saw her folding into herself. The sweaters and hoodies she wore only getting bigger, her haircuts only getting more masculine. She didn't trust me enough to say anything and this omission was what underscored our love, who we could be together.

The sun fell lower in the western horizon, cresting the tips of the water in fading light. I watched the waves crash into the shore. How they wound up as if by a toy crank, only to fall into the soft expanse of sand, safe and unaware in its complacency. A cold wind blew, picking up bits of sand with it. I thought about swimming, about walking into the water and letting myself sink. I thought about the next day, walking alone down a street crowded with trees and littered with cigarette butts. Past and future seemed to rise together and fall, like sea foam, amongst the waves.

That moment was unextraordinary. I had lived that day before, if only in pieces. I had taken my sister somewhere she needed to go and watched her leave. I had driven back to the apartment I shared with Skye, the person I loved.

I hadn't spoken to my father in three years. My sister didn't want anything from me. My mother had Ken, her new husband, and had never needed me like I needed her. The realization was stark and abstract, yet cemented in everything I could see. The old couple fifty yards down the beach, their hands lingering together but not quite intersecting. The fragments of shells before me, their sharp edges dug into the sand like the curved hulls of ships scattered across a small sea.

I stood and walked to the edge of the surf, took off my shirt, unbuttoned my jeans and peeled off my socks. I let the icy current hug my thighs. Up to my waist, my body was divided, half in and half out. Eventually, the sun would drop beneath the horizon and it would be cold. Still, I knew I was afraid of submitting to the current. I didn't trust myself to swim, but I dove anyway. Let my body decide.

## A COLD LINE

Maureen

1985

To follow a cold line is to track the faint smell of a fox.

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I didn't want children until I had them. First, a boy I had utterly no idea what to do with, got into everything, poured his juice on the floor when he got angry, pulled down his pants and peed in the supermarket in front of everyone I knew. Two years of madness.

But then, the second, a girl. We had trouble that time. I lost two pregnancies before Skye; the one that stuck. I buried the others in the cold soil behind our house, up a little ways on the hill. Joseph knew about the first child I'd lost, but I couldn't bear to tell him about the second. The doctor knew about Skye before he did. I didn't want to risk him watching me fail again.

Skye came two weeks early and has been on her own since. She was tough, self-assured, never wanted anything from me. From middle school on Skye cried in front of me only once, when she lost a soccer game to a team she was supposed to beat. I was scared to raise a girl. I worried she would turn out like me.

Being young felt like floating on my back in choppy water. Skye's era was different from the one I grew up in, but not that different. There were still boys to be dealt with, girls

who were jealous. They had to be jealous. Skye prettier than all of them. Smarter too, in a quiet way.

When she was small, Skye didn't want to do anything but follow me around. Not her father, me. To the garden in the backyard, the post office in town, she was happy just sitting in the cart while I shopped. Never said a word. Sometimes when I go to the store now, I imagine her in the basket, chubby hands clasped around the red Safeway logo in the center. Her eyes, too big for her face, trying to fit everything in, all at once.

....

My father died when I was fourteen, the summer before my freshman year of high school. It felt like a fresh start, or at least a shot at one. When I look back at those photos, I realize how truly pretty I was. Long hair with no frizz and a smile that dimpled at the sides. I never notice them anymore. I grew up in Cody. Lived in a tiny one-story house on the east side of town. My father was a ranch hand, like Joseph. Alcoholism runs in the family. On the last day of his life, he told me that he didn't see himself as a drunk. It just happened. Said that's all life was, just things happening. I think my mother was happy when he died. She got a new boyfriend after a month or so. I suspected he'd been around the entire time, but my mother wasn't the type to share things like that with her children.

...

When we were kids, my brother and I were obsessed with the salamanders that lived in the small river behind our house. Our grandfather had told us that they were ancient, one of the oldest species on earth. To us, that meant they were magic.

Once, we caught two, named them Casper and Joanie, the names we'd decided we'd give ourselves if given the chance. We clasped the lizards between our tiny, river soaked fingers when they tried to escape.

The screen door was nearly off its hinges, making it impossible to sneak in the back without our parents hearing. So we went through our bedroom window, grabbed a mason jar from the kitchen cabinet and slid them inside. Our parents weren't home. We put the jar on our shared windowsill so we could look at them in the sun. Their skin shone like crystals, like the bottom of the river after a big storm. Magic, we said to each other. Our grandfather was right.

We didn't mean to fall asleep. As we slept, I dreamed that the wide brilliance of the Montana sky swallowed us. When we woke, the room was dark. My brother kept his flashlight under his pillow, and when we shone it into the jar, Casper and Joanie were dead. Shriveled up like dates. We ran back out to the stream in the dark, thinking we could revive them. But when we dipped them under the water, they just washed away.

...

I moved out of my mother's house when I was eighteen. She assumed I was going to college but never asked. A few of my friends from cheerleading were moving to Bozeman, so I went with them. It felt simple. I enrolled at Montana State, set to study ecology.

I wanted to be a park ranger, and teach kids about the diversity of ecosystems in Yellowstone. Under the starlight, I would tell them about the bison's grazing patterns, about the best way to keep their campsites safe from bears, why it's important to keep the sky dark. At school, I liked my classes. I liked the girls I lived with. Each of them was a little like me, but different.

Sarah had short dark hair she tucked behind her ears when she talked to boys she liked. Wore red lipstick every time she went out. Kate was quieter, the intellectual of the group. We tried to get her to dress up once in a while, but she always wore t-shirts she cut so they just reached the top of her jeans. I found out later she'd gotten married to a woman and moved with her to Oregon. I saw her go out with plenty of boys in college, but none of them ever stuck. Looking back, I saw flickers of it, but she never shared much with me.

The three of us used to go out all the time. Wore each other's clothes and long dangly earrings we stole from the little stores on Main street. One night, we went out to Riley's house near campus. Sarah knew him from her economics class but didn't have an interest in sleeping with him, so she decided to pawn him off on me.

The air in his house was thick and stiff with smoke when we arrived. His roommate had brought cigars back from Florida after spring break. That's the only way I can remember it was April, the smell of the cigars. The three of us sat on his couch and crossed our legs. Riley offered each of us a beer.

"Charlie should be here soon. He's bringing JP," Riley said. He sat cross-legged on the shag carpet in front of the couch.

Riley's house was old, built in the forties, as he later told me. There weren't many old houses in Bozeman, even back then. Everything had the feeling of being new, even if it wasn't. Cody was small, cozy, just old cowboys and their wives. But Bozeman felt shiny, like the entire place had been doused in Clorox.

"Did you do the paper for Brown's class?" Sarah asked.

I realized it had been silent for a while.

"Nah," Riley said.

“What are you guys writing about?” I asked.

Riley caught my eyes, smiled briefly, then looked away. It felt like flirting, but I wasn't sure.

“Whether or not we feel beef production is the best land use for Montana,” he answered, looking only at me.

“Well,” I leaned forward, playing interested, “is it?”

“Answer's complicated.”

“It doesn't have to be,” I shot back. “Is it or is it not?”

“The question of land use in Montana is complicated and that's all I'm going to say,” Riley said and smirked. I felt as if we were the only people in the room.

I was used to feeling like guys were looking at me. But even then, I knew something about him was different. Like a spoon stuck in the disposal, the gears of my life caught at that moment, my thighs pressed into the pilling couch.

...

We weren't dating. But we were together. Walked to class together, got drinks with our friends on the weekends. It was nice, but not perfect. I didn't like how he chewed his food with his mouth open or how he ignored his mother's calls. He hated when I wore perfume or lipstick. He told me he liked me in jeans, a blouse, nothing complicated.

Once, I wore a new pink tennis skirt over to his house and he ripped the zipper open with one hand, the other, pushed against the center of my chest. I remember how cold I was, standing in the center of his living room in my panties, the elastic digging into my thighs and the sides of my hips. I felt like I was encased in glass, like a museum display of taxidermied

animals. I was trapped in the confines of my body, the world around me in perfect focus, but I couldn't move.

We didn't go to the party. Just laid in his bed while he apologized over and over, said he'd never acted like that before, perhaps it was because I was so beautiful, he couldn't let anyone else look at me the same way he did.

You're perfect, he used to say, over and over until it sounded like an insult. Until it was all I heard when I fell asleep at night, or when I woke in the morning. I tried to get him to stop saying it. Showed up with my hair mussed or lipstick on my teeth. I yelled and cried at sad movies, things I'd never done before. I became the type of girl I hated for him, until I looked in the mirror and couldn't recognize myself.

I started to think, what would this girl do, what would she act like, what celebrities would she care about, would she listen to The Talking Heads or Joni Mitchell after the party? Would she like herself? Would she listen when her professors spoke? Would she cross her legs at dinner? Or leave them spread open, so whoever they wanted could come over, push their heads under the tablecloth and look?

...

I should've known what would happen. Even now, when I wake up in my bed next to Joseph and stretch and shove my feet into the slippers he gave me for Christmas last year, I think, I should've known. I replay the night in my head while I shave my legs, apply mascara, pull the starchy flesh-colored tights up my legs for work at the doctor's office. His belt buckle is there, floating in the milk as it boils for oatmeal. The candy flavored lip balm I wore that night hides at the bottom of my purse as I walk out the door in search of my car keys.



His hands are there too. Around my neck as I start the car, which, although I bought it only a few years ago, somehow smells like him. Riley lives on the east coast now, moved with the girl he started dating a few years after me. They probably got married eventually. One year, shortly after he moved, he sent me a Christmas card with the two of them smiling on the outside. She had blond hair and a weak chin. He looked the same, but I noticed he'd gotten his ears pierced, a small zirconia diamond embedded in each ear lobe. I couldn't stand to look at him. He didn't seem real, like a ghost.

...

It happened at the end of November, right after Thanksgiving, which came late that year. We were supposed to go to the movies with a few of his friends, but he said they bailed, so we went around driving instead. That was common to do back then, just drive around and smoke cigarettes and maybe weed if someone had it. I was still fairly new to Bozeman then, not familiar really at all with the backroads, especially those that go up toward Missoula. Riley had an old Volkswagen sedan, around a 64' or 65'. It ran okay, but the fabric seats were itchy and it had a faint smell of something sweet, like a pack of Skittles had gotten stuck under a seat and hardened.

We drove north toward the forests away from the park. It had rained the day before and the road was slick. Every time we went around a curve, water sloshed under our tires like rising waves. I rolled down my window and smelled wildfire, stale from weeks before, tamped by the rain. Riley usually drove like a madman, whipping around turns and drifting over the centerline, but he was calm that night. We were both stoned, having stopped at Cash's before the supposed movie and both took too many hits of something he'd smuggled over the Canadian border a few days before.

Perhaps due to the late rain or the weed, the world illuminated by the headlights looked crystallized, like a thin layer of glass coated every leaf, every fallen branch on the road. I remember thinking it looked like we had stepped into another version of Montana, an unreal place that looked, felt, smelled like the one we knew, but wasn't, like returning home and finding a single book had fallen off the bookshelf and onto the floor.

After a while, the road we were on turned to gravel and Riley pulled over to a small overlook. It was dark, I could only make out the shapes of dark green leaves that stuck against either side of the car. Neither of us had noticed that the radio had gone static a while back. Riley reached over to the plastic radio knobs and tried to change the station, but we were too far out to pick up anything.

“What now?” I asked and pulled my leg up on the seat.

He reached over and put his hand on my leg. The gesture was hesitant, almost tender. He looked so small then, his shoulders tucked into his back like a bird's wings.

What happened next comes in flashes. At some point, he asked me to get into the back seat, which was always laid flat so he could store his bike or deliveries from his job at the plastics plant. He spread out a blanket, and I remember feeling the rough braided fabric against my back when he was on top of me, how his body pushed me further and further into the seat. It felt like I was in a submarine and he was the millions of tons of water pushing on me. The hard metal of the ship would crack at any moment, and I'd be buried.

I looked up at the dirty ceiling of the car, and not knowing what was before or what was after, suspended in time. I was only pulled back to reality in short bursts of sound. Riley locking the doors. The scream of wind in the valley. Wrapping around trees, begging to take

branches, souvenirs with it. The static of the radio. I was no longer a body, not a person either.

Reality sunk away. I lost feeling in my limbs, in the hard dryness of my mouth. I was sure I said no at some point, but can't remember if it was aloud. Once I did, it echoed through my head like the flutter of wings in a cave.

I tried to remember things my mother had told me. I tried to do math equations. I couldn't bring myself to face the actuality of him inside me. How foreign it felt, as if he'd misplaced something and was searching frantically without relief. Later, I would force myself to remember the violence of it. His fingernails dug into my wrists, and later, bruises like the indents of teeth. The locked doors. His hand into my mouth so I couldn't breathe. I didn't bite down. I could have. Even now, I am unsure why I did not bite down.

When he finished, he got out of the car without his boots on, and I could see his feet sinking into the wet mud, mottled with ice and snow through the crack in the open door. I sat up, my shirt still on, but one of the buttons on the front had broken, the string no longer threaded through the eye as it had been. I got in the front seat.

I felt myself drift. As if the person sitting in the itchy front seat of the Volkswagen wasn't me, but a person I could only recognize as myself, as if I were in a dream. In this version of this dream, I was crossing the street. But then, there I was, in the stopped car. I turned to wave, but the windshield was tinted and I can't make anything on the inside out. Not gender, height, hair color, nothing. Nothing.

...

Two months later, I went to a clinic and took a pill.

I wasn't speaking to Jake anymore. He didn't have a right to know. I asked the nurse if I needed anything else but she said this would take care of it. That I should probably take it easy for a few weeks, no drinking or going out.

I had to drive five hours to Missoula for the appointment, and missed an entire day of class. On the drive back, I rolled down the windows in Kate's car, a newer four-door Bug. The roads were dry for the first time in months. I drove in silence for a minute, not listening to anything. Soon, the silence became overwhelming, too much for me to bear. I turned the radio to a country station. I tried to think of anything but the white sterile tile of the women's bathroom when the strip turned pink. The heavy jowls of the nurse who'd checked me into the clinic.

I looked down at this girl driving, this girl, this pretty girl who had a living thing in her stomach that was now dying. I pictured it shriveling up like the salamanders my brother and I caught. I pictured it moving through me. Eventually, washing away.

The next few months passed achingly slow. I couldn't do anything but sit in my room and imagine the future Jake had taken from me. I prided myself on being the type of girl who waited, who lacked baggage. Now, I'd been pregnant and gotten an abortion.

I didn't spend much time thinking about forgiveness. I had a new interest every day. Bugs, trees, ivy, invasive species generally, the mating patterns of toads, the different ways in which bricks can be laid, Montana ledge, Bavarian castle, Italian fieldstone. I researched ghost towns, nineteenth century science fiction. I wanted to know how and why things came and left, and fell into place the way that they did.

I stopped eating. I began to love the feeling of cold water in my stomach when it was empty. If I got hungry, I ate saltines until my fingers swelled. Ate sugar by the spoonful until

I threw up. My roommates worried but I didn't care. It was a new abstinence. My body begged to be empty. Devoid of decision, of anecdote. I craved neutrality. To stand still for a moment and for absolutely nothing to move.

I ran by the lake and exalted at the bend that denoted exactly halfway. I put books down after the fourth chapter. I didn't want anything to begin, didn't want anything to end.

...

My father never taught me much. Like many of the girls' fathers I grew up with, he was mostly absent. He moved from ranch job to ranch job, picking up work based on the season, sometimes forty or fifty miles away from Cody.

I was eight years old and it was still dark out. When I was young, I shared a room with my brother. He was four years older than me and snored loudly while he slept. That night, I drifted between waking and sleeping for hours, restless and confused. After a while, I decided to get up and read on the porch until my mother woke up my brother and me for school. It was May, finally warm enough to sit outside without a jacket. But I brought my coat along with my flashlight anyway.

My father worked nights and came home around the same time we would be leaving for school. But that morning, he was sitting on the porch, seemingly waiting for me. I sat in the rocking chair next to him. He looked clearer than usual, his blue eyes shining under the white light of the moon.

From my birth to his death when I was fifteen, that night would be the only time I saw him without shoes. It was strange, seeing a part of him I'd always known was there, but had lacked clarity and detail. His toes were longer than I expected. The thick ribbed socks he

wore underneath his steel toed work boots lay next to his chair like parallel train tracks.

Despite being a drunk, my father was a clean man. Everything, always on-time and in-order.

I was so fixated on his feet, the utter newness and mystery of them - did they bear any resemblance to my own? - that I didn't notice he was looking at me. He turned his head toward the smattering of mountains in the distance.

"Someone lied to you," he said again.

Unsure of what he meant, I stayed silent, hoping he would elaborate.

"The sun doesn't really rise," he continued. "It's not this slow process of it cresting over the horizon, inching its fiery spot up and over bit by bit. No, the sun just appears. There's only one moment in-between, of light and dark on either side."

I nodded, and we sat there, waiting for the sun.

...

One day a few months after my abortion, I drove to Cody and idled in the car outside my mother's house. She had gotten a new mailbox, a white one with a rooster painted on the side. I knew I couldn't go in, couldn't see my mother. I didn't know how to, felt I would break down when she opened the door. She would know but not ask. She would insist on making tea. We would sit there across the yellow painted table, her mouth pulled into a taut line, her small eyes shifting all over me like his hands were still there.

As I drove away, something in my gut still pulled me toward the idea of mother. I wished to be held by her, to bury my face into her chest. To tell her how the future I'd wished for myself was no longer there.

How I felt the cells in my body split open and rearrange when the baby fell out of me a few days after the pill. That tangle of blood and spit and apparently, according to a

pamphlet at the doctor's office, fingernails, even that early. I wanted to tell her about the fingernails. About how I stood there, over my good underwear filled with blood on the floor. About the lamp on my bedside table, illuminating, infecting everything with its light.

I wanted to tell my mother that I felt the baby slide out of me, even in my sleep. I walked outside in the snow, one of Jake's old t-shirts grazing my knees and threw my underwear and the girl in the dumpster behind our house.

The baby was a girl. I didn't have the capacity to create a son. The men in my life either left or died. This girl was different. She was forced out by my own inability to speak, to move in a particular direction, to scream or cry or say no.

The stars were upsettingly bright. Their pale insistence infringed on my sorrow. I stood out there long enough for the snow to seep through my house shoes. It became too cold to stay, so I went back.

I walked upstairs to my room and went to bed. I wanted to tell my mother that too. How easily I fell asleep. I woke in the morning to the winter sun piercing through my window. I wanted to tell her how I didn't feel anything at all.

...

I met Joseph a few months later. He was kind, easygoing, never made me choose where we were going. I liked how he wore button up cowboy shirts and polished Doc Martens everywhere, even to class. He had the easy swagger of a man who'd grown up around all different types of people. He could talk to anyone. We'd be sitting at a bar just a few minutes before another guy around our age started a conversation with him. They'd have something in common, they both liked the Lions or worshipped Salinger. We'd spend the entire night with the guy, hear how he grew up in Ann Arbor but had always wanted to move

west. He'd had a single mom but never felt his father's absence. He'd live in Montana forever if he could quit his job at the plant and fly fish all day.

That's something I'd love to make a career out of, Joseph would say, taking a sip of his beer, and I'd realize I hadn't said a word the entire time.

On our first date, Joseph said he never wanted to have children. I agreed and that was that. Our relationship felt like turning the TV on halfway into a movie that I never stopped watching. Together, we were able to shirk our baggage. Together, we pretended it didn't exist.

He barely asked about my life before him. He was so engulfed by other people's stories, mine didn't seem as important.

...

A year or so into our relationship, Joseph took me swimming in the glacial ponds out past Quake Lake. It was a warm Saturday in June and we were the only ones there. I'd made salami sandwiches with pepper jelly and he'd brought beer. I stood down by the edge of the water, my feet dug between the tiny particles of rocky sand.

"Hey," he called out, "come help me with this hammock!"

I crossed my arms and walked up the steep incline toward him, the soil cool on the soles of my feet.

"You couldn't manage?" I asked, picking up the other end of the rope. Noticed how nice his hair looked in the light, a few silver hairs shining in the sea of black, like a shimmer on the crest of a wave.

"Needed your big strong muscles," he said. Winked at me.



We each lifted our ropes so we were even with one another, tied them tight around the tree's trunk. Mine took a bit of finagling to stay, and I got sap on my hands.

"Might need to make a notch on this side," I said. "Stick a nail below it."

"I'll look at it in a minute," he said and took off his shirt. "For now, we swim."

Joseph ran down the bank in his hiking boots before unlacing them and peeling off his socks, stuffing them one by one into the boots.

He turned. "Are you coming or not?"

"Be patient," I said, crossed my arms over my chest as I walked down the bank.

He took off his shorts and underwear before diving in, his body like a clean knife cutting through the still water.

I unbuttoned my shorts and wiggled them down to the ground. A breeze swept over the lake and my nipples grew hard, reacting to the temperature. Joseph took a few small strokes before turning around to look for me.

"You coming?" he asked again. Pushed his hair up so I could see the pale whiteness of his scalp.

I stood on the edge of the sand. The midday sun reflected on the surface of the water like a round coughdrop. The Gallatin range rose high in the distance, trapping the lake on three sides. I felt myself growing desperate for a way out. Fear like a slow simmering in my chest. I couldn't do it. I imagined myself below the surface of the water. Eyes open. The clear promise of water suddenly overwhelming, I dug my hands under my armpits, pushed my breasts against my chest as I walked back to the car, feeling foolish and cold with my bare chest exposed.

I never got in. I just sat watched him swim. I stayed on the shore, the space between the land and the water. When the sun turned orange behind the tree cover, our signal to go home, I rose and stepped back onto the cool mud of the bank. In a moment, Joseph would follow me. But for now, I was on my own as I walked the path back to the truck, my feet sinking in the mud, trapping me again and again.

## BRACE

Skye

2005

When counting foxes, two equal a brace and three equal a leash.

---

The air in Montana is thinner than in New York. I gasp for breath in the middle of the trail. I haven't run this route since the last time I was home two years ago, and it's much steeper than anything in the city. Above me, the aspen trees crowd the thin dirt trail as it winds up the mountain.

I turn and see Jaime, running up behind me.

"Catch up slowpoke!" I yell.

She puts her hands on her hips as she walks the short distance between us. When she lifts the bottom of her shirt to wipe her face, I notice a scatter of freckles across her soft stomach and a faint trail of hair below her belly button.

"Give me two more weeks and I'll be waiting for you at the top of that mountain with a full spread. Bagels, coffee, the works," she says.

"The logistics seem difficult, but I'll choose to believe you."

“As the designated smartest person I know, I’m sure you could figure it out,” she says.

“Jesus, who are you hanging out with these days?” I put my hands on the small of my back, stretching.

A large swell of dry western air breaks against the mountain, and I smell wildfire. A few days ago, a man in Missoula left a small brush fire unattended, and the entire valley caught. They’ve been trying to put it out, but the wind keeps changing directions.

“When are you going back to New York?” she asks.

“The 18th. My flight leaves in the afternoon,” I say, and a bead of sweat falls into my eye, burning.

“Well, what are you doing later today?”

“Running errands with my mom.”

Jaime frowns, and notices her shoes sinking into the mud.

“Oh shit,” she says. “I just got these last week.”

She walks over to a tree and starts kicking it, banging the mud off the bottom of her shoes.

“There will be more dirt on the way down, you know.”

“Preventive measures,” she says.

The small sapling’s branches start shaking, and a few bright green leaves fall to the forest floor.

“I think you’re hurting it.”

“It’s a tree, Skye.”

The trunk swings back and forth. She kicks hard, mechanically, in the same spot, but makes no progress. The mud holds firm, caked to her shoes like a thick slab of cement.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, leaning back on my heels. Suddenly I am unsure how to hold myself.

“Yeah,” she says, and stops kicking. “Let’s run down.”

“You don’t want to go to the top?”

A bird in a nearby bush calls out then flies diagonally across the trail - squawking.

“Another day.”

“You’re just trying to opt out of me kicking your ass.”

Without saying anything, she starts sprinting down the mountain. For a moment, I don’t run after her. I watch as she curves gracefully between the trees. A thick fog rims the bottom of the mountain. I don’t start running until she’s swallowed by it.

...

Jaime climbed Electric Peak, the second highest summit in Yellowstone, in the rain. We were supposed to hike together, on a cloudless summer day four years ago. But two in the afternoon and halfway up, heavy clouds congregated above us and suddenly, we were in the thick of the storm. I begged her to turn back, but she wouldn’t look at me, just kept crawling up the slick rocks.

I, too stubborn to follow her, waited under a ledge for an hour, convinced she’d fallen off the mountain. I was considering how I’d break the news to her mother when she stumbled down - hair soaking wet and her right knee streaked with blood. She said she’d slipped, insisting it was only a scratch. I drove her to urgent care with her bloodied leg propped up on

the dashboard. I didn't understand how she could be so stupid, how she could make me worry like that.

I was so angry at her then. I got over it, like I always did, but began to notice how I was always the one waiting at the bottom of the mountain. That it was her ride, even if I was the one driving.

...

My mother crouches on the linoleum floor of the Walmart.

"Do you really need another crock pot? You'll have two, even after I take that old one back with me," I say.

"It's on sale," she says.

"Okay, whatever you think."

"We save by living in that old house," she says, then takes the box off the shelf and hands it to me.

She never used to let me carry anything in high school, said my arms might get bulky.

"Do we need anything else?" I ask.

My mom stares blankly at the shelf, a package of paper towels tucked under one arm and a small bottle of hand sanitizer in her opposite hand.

"This should be good, I just wanted a few things," she says, and pushes her long hair out of her face. There's a smudge of lipstick on her chin, and I have an urge to wipe it off with my thumb.

We walk out of the kitchen section and head toward the garden center, my sneakers squeaking loudly on the cement. It's snowed all week, unusual for March, and the store is

crowded. Wet grass and thin stalks of hay litter the floor, everyone dressed in zip-up Carhartt jackets and work boots. Girls my age walk alongside their fathers or in packs of three or four, hair bleached blond, eyes coated in bright blue eyeshadow. One of the girls eyes me as we pass the fishing gear. I don't know what I want her to see.

As we turn the corner, a woman around my mother's age tries to reach for a box of work boots on the top shelf. She has wide streaks of gray in her long black hair and one of her eyes drifts towards her nose. I set the crockpot on the ground and stretch onto my tiptoes to pull the shoebox down for her.

"Thank you so much, nice to see there's a few of you left, real gentlemen" she says, and smiles.

I meet her eyes, and hope my mom didn't hear. My mother stands in the middle of the wide central aisle, staring at us.

I turn to walk away when the woman calls out, "you have a good son here ma'am, I wish all of us could be so lucky!"

I freeze, and avoid my mother's gaze.

"I'm just tall," I say.

I pick the crock pot up off the floor and motion to my mom in the direction of the cashier. The woman looks at me strangely, but places the shoes in her cart, and heads the opposite direction down the aisle toward the fishing poles. My mother and I both sigh with relief, and the sharp smell of fresh azaleas envelops us as we walk through the sliding glass doors into the garden center.

...

In the car, my mother breathes deeply, her eyes cast downward.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” she asks.

“What?”

“What people say. I mean, it can’t be much different at school,” she says, and motions in front of her at all the people buckling their toddlers into car seats or clicking their doors shut.

“I guess I don’t notice it much anymore,” I lie.

“Maybe if you dressed, I don’t know, let your hair grow. I can give you the vitamins my friend Michelle used when her hair started thinning.”

“I’m not going bald, Mom,” I say.

A man across the lot pulls his small son onto his shoulders. The kid’s cheeks are round, his head still hairless. He has on overalls and tiny lace up boots, like a train conductor.

“I mean, what do the boys at school think?”

“They don’t think much, trust me.”

The wipers scrape against the dry windshield.

“I want what’s best for you, but you’ve changed so much,” she says, taking my hand in hers. “Remember I know you better than anybody, right?”

“I know.”

My mother lets go of my hand and places hers back on the steering wheel. She turns the radio on - it’s static, but she doesn’t change the channel, just turns down the volume.

“I care about you, Skye. Don’t forget that,” she says, and puts the car in reverse.



I pull my leg up on the seat, knee to my chest, and change the radio station to NPR. Bob Edwards is talking about the war, says a bombing in Baghdad last week killed seventy three people. I turn the volume up, and it begins to snow as we head home.

...

My Dad has worked on the ranch out on Ditch road since I was fifteen. It's owned by the Conner's family, the only other Catholic family in town, and he jumped at the chance when the manager position opened up.

I drive with a bag of bagels and two cups of gas station coffee balanced in the shallow cup holders of my rental car. I've been trying not to drive it and save on the mileage, but he got in late last night and left in a rush this morning.

It used to be a tradition between the two of us, bringing each other breakfast on bad days. The day after I lost my first soccer match of junior year, I walked into homeroom to find a bag of a dozen donuts on my desk, still hot. When his old supervisor quit and the new one assigned him to desk duty, filling out schedules and inputting data, I skipped my morning classes to make banana nut muffins, his favorite. He likes them the way I make them best, with extra butter and cinnamon.

I turn into the dirt parking lot in front of the office, my tires slipping a little on the wet ground. A couple of men stand outside the door, smoking. I get out of the car and zip my jacket all the way up, trying to avoid their eyes. I slip in the door and head straight to my Dad's office.

He's sitting at his desk when I walk in, hunched over his computer keyboard. I study him for changes. Stripes of pink skin peek out from behind his thinning grey hair and the lines around his eyes have deepened.

“What a surprise!” he says, smiling. “How’s my baby girl?”

I shrug and hold up the bag of bagels, “wasn’t sure if you’d had breakfast.”

Placing the bag on his desk, I begin to unzip my jacket and feel him watching me, studying me. I sit down, push the sleeves of my thermal around my elbows.

“You look stronger,” he says.

I dig out a cinnamon bagel and a plastic container of cream cheese and hand it to him. He takes the lid off his coffee, and puts a single sugar inside.

“I don’t know why,” I say. “I feel like all I do is watch movies and walk to class.”

I know it’s from performing with the guys three days a week. Sometimes, after a particularly good show, I consider calling him. I want to tell him so much. How the person I am on stage is the same person who went fishing with him ten years ago, who cried when he took the hook out of the sunfish’s cheek. I wanted to grow up to be just like him, thoughtful and deliberate, with a strong chest and lace-up boots.

He nods, takes a bite of his bagel.

“Did you read that book?” I ask. A few months ago, I found an old copy of ‘All the Pretty Horses’ in a thrift bin outside the library and sent it to him.

“Yeah, it was good. I like that guy, what’s his name,” he trails off.

“McCarthy,” I say.

He shifts in his seat, uncomfortable. My grandfather died two years ago from Alzheimers. Dad never talks about it. We didn’t really speak to him since he moved to Texas when I was six. He was burly, tough in a way my father wasn’t. He drank and spat and hit my grandmother until she left him in the mid-nineties. He sold his house and bought two acres of land in the Rio Grande Valley for nothing.

A few years later, my father got a call from his brother one day out of the blue that their father had died. I was in New York and couldn't afford to fly out for the funeral, but sent flowers in my place. Dad never mentioned it.

He swirls his coffee in his cup before taking a sip.

"Your hair is short," he says like it's a question.

"I cut it," I say.

"It suits you."

I nod, not sure what to say.

...

By the time I get to Jaime's house, boys in worn-out sneakers and crisp new button up shirts are throwing up on the lawn or buying weed next to the budding rose bushes.

When I open the front door, I see Jaime leaning against the white, rusting refrigerator, cornered by a guy who looks ten years her senior. One of his hands is pressed flat against the fridge. The other, worming its way in-between the waistband of her jeans and her bare hip. I put my hand deep into the front pocket of my pants.

"Hey, someone's asking if you have more ice," I say, placing my hand on Jaime's shoulder. "It's a national emergency."

"Oh, I'll get to that," she says, wiggling out of his reach. "I'll see you later. Brian right?"

He nods like his neck is made of rubber.

"Thank you so much for getting me out of that; his breath smelled like mushrooms and like, baby food?" Jaime says as we walk away.

I notice she's wearing the shirt I bought her when she visited me in New York freshman year. We went to Times Square, and despite the commercialization, she was convinced there'd still be a few peep shows open. Once we'd walked around twice without being offered drugs or sex for pay, she got coffee while I snuck into a shop and bought it. A naked Snow White and a dwarf circle jerk stretches across the front in cheap vinyl. Snow White's left breast is almost peeled all the way off and two of the dwarves hats are missing.

"Where is your mom tonight?" I ask.

"She went to go visit my uncle in Bozeman. He's in rehab again. She'll be gone all weekend."

"You didn't want to join the intervention? It looks fun on the show. I watched one where a lady shit on a car," I say, locating a bottle of gin on an end table. A picture of Jaime in a Princess Leia costume is propped up behind it. She's smiling like she has two jawbreakers in her full cheeks.

"I don't think Ben shits on cars so much as he just passes out on his girlfriend's couch with his hand down his pants," Jaime says. "Oh, and speaking of, Jake came by last night and gave me these," she pulls a small plastic baggie out of her pocket with two yellow pills inside.

"He just gave them to you?"

She shrugs.

I take a sip of gin and it burns all the way to my stomach.

"Find me when you want to," she says and runs her hand through my hair. "I'm still getting used to it."

She walks away. I don't follow her.

...

I cut my hair myself, two months ago. My usual show was cancelled because a pipe burst in the bar next door. So, me and the other performers went out in Brooklyn. The queens always wanted to go to the bars with gogo dancers in lifted cages. That time however, the kings won out and we ended up in a small, grungy lesbian bar where the bartenders wore leather vests with nothing underneath.

I was on my first drink when a girl complimented my jacket. I bought her a gin and tonic and remember how she asked thoughtful questions, that her voice caught sweetly in the back of her throat when she spoke. She was from Minnesota and had every Ani diFranco album on vinyl.

We went back to my apartment. Once we were inside, she pushed me against my bedroom wall, more forcefully than I expected. I put my hands in her hair; she smelled like the shampoo I used in high school, the kind with the strawberry on the front. She began to unbutton my shirt but once she got halfway down, she fixed her eyes on the layers of ace bandage I use to bind my breasts for drag performances, or recently, most of the time. Her eyes lingered on purple and yellow welts that lined the edge of the bandage, blistered and irritated under the compression.

“I like girls,” she said, and shut my bedroom door behind her gently, so as not to wake Garrett in the next room.

I used Garrett’s clippers to shave my head. I watched as the length of my hair fell into the sink, like flower petals after an early freeze. I expected to feel different. Like I was leaving part of myself behind. Once I was done, I looked into the dirty bathroom mirror, my

face wet with tears and littered with bits of black hair like the makeshift stubble I used for performances.

Bent over a sink filled with my own hair, I could see myself in a way I hadn't before. I stared at the circles under my eyes, the small cleft of my chin, the freckles on my cheeks. Everything looked new, scrubbed raw, but startlingly mine. I took off my shirt. A cascade of hair fell out of it, swept across the floor, over my bare shoulders. I unwrapped the bandages binding my chest and traced my fingers over the bruises on my ribcage. They looked nearly black in the dim bathroom light.

The month before, at the drag show, when one of the kings unbuttoned his shirt during the set, instead of tape or bandages, he had two scars thin as razor blades circumventing his chest. After that, I stayed awake at night imagining the scars were mine. I asked around to see if anyone else knew what the surgery was like. A friend of a friend and I met for drinks. He sipped his beer and said he couldn't remember his body before the surgery, that the one he'd lived in before had never been his to begin with.

"It was like I unzipped my skin," he said. "Only to find a whole new self underneath."

I cut my hair every few weeks now. Garrett insists I leave the top long, but he helps me with the back and the sides. I can't remember what I looked like before. I don't want to.

...

In the corner of the room, David stands so close to Jaime that his breath travels into her collar. The gin burns the back of my throat. I catch her eye and motion her over. She slips out from under his reach and places her hand on my shoulder, her head cocked to the side in question.

“Sure, why not?” I say. I place the small pill on my tongue. Swallow and feel myself split open, like an orange left too long in the sun.

...

The world turns liquid, then black, then liquid again. Across from me on the couch, a boy tells me about a family in Billings who found dinosaur bones in their yard.

“It’s a museum now,” he says. “You can even go underground to look at some of the bones they didn’t want to pull out of the dirt.”

I think about descending into the cold, dark earth. Of the pulsing quiet. The elevator malfunctioning. Crushed under the two hundred tons of soil. A small pocket of air. Breathing. Someone turns on a light in the kitchen. Alcohol drips out of a cup onto the counter, then, steady onto the floor. Then, the girl from Minnesota. The light behind her, bright and beautiful. I think about her leaving, the disgusted look in her eyes. The same look in my father’s when I shot the fox by the reservoir. The uncomfortable truth of me. Unearthed. The taste of dirt in my mouth, collecting in my throat, pushing up my nose. The white tip of a red tail descending into a black forest. Jaime. A sink filled with hair. My body cut into perfect cubes. Strewn across the living room. Bending over and picking up a piece of my own hand. How small I could become, just like that.

...

I open my eyes to Jaime smoking a cigarette on the edge of her unmade bed. My shoes are gone and the back of my head feels like it’s filled with sand.

“What time is it?” I say, sitting up in bed.

“Like four in the morning.”

The right side of her mouth is swollen, her mascara halfway down her cheeks.

“You okay?”

“David was fucking around and I hit my mouth on the stairs,” Jaime says.

“Can I take a look?”

She offers up her cheek, and I run my fingers over it. I can’t remember the last time we were this close but not kissing.

“I think you’re going to make it kid. Might need to remove the head, but after that you’ll be good to go,” I say.

She rolls her eyes at me and takes a slow drag of her cigarette. The window on the other side of the room is open, and a slight breeze blows inside. I move to get up off the bed, and Jaime pulls on my arm.

“You can’t go home tonight.”

“I want to find my shoes,” I say.

“Find them in the morning. I want you here with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, and lean against the headboard.

I motion for her to join me. She nods, puts her cigarette out on the windowsill and rests on my shoulder. I kiss her forehead. Push her hair behind her ears. Let my fingers linger on her neck. I tug on her t-shirt so the graphic is visible.

“I can’t believe you still wear this.”

“It’s my favorite.”

“I can’t begin to understand why,” I say.

“Don’t do that.”

The window bangs against the frame in the breeze. Jaime’s house borders the forest, and if I listen closely, wind hisses in between the fine needles of aspen trees.



“What?”

“That thing you always do.”

“That is?” I ask.

“Pretend like people don’t care about you,” she says.

I find the small scar on her right eyebrow, the mole on her left earlobe. She breathes in. I place my thumb under her chin and pull her toward me. Messy, at first. My hands on the side of her face. My bottom lip against her chin. But, the kiss deepens. I pull her on top of me, pushing my hands underneath her shirt, pulling it over her shoulders. She untucks my t-shirt from my pants, her hands cold against my bare stomach.

She traces the bottom of my sports bra, finding the ace bandage underneath. I take both of her hands in mine and lift them over her head. I push her shirt over her shoulders. The full moon hangs in the window. The pale light creates shadows under her breasts, the curve of her stomach, the sides of her hips. It is heartbreakingly obvious how beautiful she is.

She intertwines her fingers behind my neck. I kiss the soft space between her breasts. Pushing my knee carefully between her legs and sitting up so my mouth is even with the top of her jeans, I unbutton them. She exhales, and moves my hands, pulling her own jeans off. I slide her underwear down, and kiss her. She puts her hand on the back of my head, and I move my hands up and down the back of her thighs.

When she finishes, I lean back in the bed, catching my breath. She lays next to me. Her chest rises and falls slowly. In the window, I can see the first few rays of sunlight peeking out from behind the clouds.

“Are you going back to New York?” she says, and looks at me.

I sigh, and feel my heartbeat grow steady in my chest. I think of my shitty apartment in Greenpoint. My bed in the corner, perfectly made. The plants I hope Garrett is watering on the windowsill.

I don't answer her. A few full, swollen moments pass.

"Jaime?"

"Yeah?"

"I think I'm in love with you."

She doesn't say anything, just rolls over and faces the wall. I don't know if it's the truth. Both of us lie there for a while, not touching, the sun cresting over the mountains in the window. The room fills with light like juice in a clean glass. I stare at the ceiling, my palms flat against my chest.

...

A story about a hurricane in Florida plays on the television when I get home. It's 10:00 a.m. My mother slices oranges on the kitchen counter. My father stands beside her, his hands in the pockets of his plaid pajama pants.

"Skye?" she calls out, "is that you?"

Shit. I look at myself in the hall mirror, and my hair is standing up in spikes all over my head. There's a small tear in my shirt collar.

"Yeah, I'm just going to go lay down."

"Will you come here for a second?"

I push my hair down against my scalp the best I can, and poke my head around the corner.

"All the way in, please. I want to talk to you," she says.

I notice how she's wearing the pajamas I sent her for Christmas two years ago. The top has large plastic buttons and a mechanic-style nametag on the left breast with 'Mrs. Claus' written in block script. My father has a matching pair that says Santa in the same place. I wonder if he's ever worn his.

"What's up?" I say, and take a seat on one of the barstools at the kitchen counter.

A few pieces of pulp are tangled up in one of the long strands of hair that frames her face. I want to reach across the counter and pull them out, but don't, watch as they swing when she moves her head.

She looks up at me, and says, "what's going on with your hair?"

"I slept at Jaime's."

She coughs, slices into an orange. The inside of it is dry and cracked, almost white in the center. March is too early for oranges.

"Oh, that's fine."

"If I thought you minded I would've asked," I say, reaching across the counter to pick up a piece of pulp and crush it between my thumb and forefinger.

"How's her Mom?" she asks.

"I didn't see her. She was in Bozeman last night."

I look at my dad, still silent, leaning against the counter by the fridge. His eyes are cast down, his hands by his sides. I can tell they'd been discussing something before I came in.

"I worry about that girl."

"Jaime?"

"She's always been reckless," my mother says, keeping her eyes cast down.

“I guess.”

Something on the television flashes behind her, and I look up. A blonde reporter with slicked wet hair and a bright yellow raincoat stands on a low-slung porch with a microphone in her hand. Behind her, the road is submerged in at least five feet of water, and a telephone pole bends sharply in the gale, the thick wires swinging like jump ropes.

“People always talked about her.”

I nod, rapping my fingers against the countertop. My Mom places the squeezed orange on the counter and some of the sinewy insides spill out.

“One of the girls from the office has a daughter like her. She’s real torn up about it.”

“Like Jaime how?”

She walks over to the fridge and takes out the coffee creamer. Her robe is open, and the belt drags across the floor. She pours the cream and coffee into her cup, but doesn’t take a sip.

“Kristen really has no idea what to do,” my mother continues. “The girl is only fourteen and has already decided she doesn’t like boys. Says she wants to date girls instead.”

Outside, I watch as a small bird lands on the feeder on our front porch. It looks around, guilty. Shaking his wings a little, a few seeds fall onto the wooden railing.

“Jaime dates boys.”

“I worry about her,” my mother says. “God knows her mother doesn’t have the time.”

There’s only a few tablespoons of orange juice in the bottom of the circular bowl, thick with pulp. Small bubbles form on the surface.

“I think her Mom is happy to have her around.”

The bird on the feeder flies away. I watch as its wings pick up speed, following a vague line toward the mountains on the other end of the valley.

“We tried hard to have you Skye. A lot of money went into it,” she takes a breath. “I didn’t think it would happen after your brother.”

“What does this have to do with me?” I say. My face grows hot.

There is a long silence. Last year, in the East Village a man put his hand around my throat and pushed me against the mottled brick wall. With his chest, he pinned me and stared at me. I still have scars from where his fingernails dug into my skin.

“What even are you anyway,” he said.

I have never known how to answer.

“You were so pretty when you were little,” my father says, breaking his silence.

“I wanted a girl more than anything,” my mother says.

He tries to catch my eye but I refuse him, put my face in my hands.

“We still do Skye,” she continues.

“It’s not like I can be anything else.”

A moment passes. The air in front of me becomes difficult to see through.

My mother is still cutting oranges. The bird is no longer on the windowsill. My father is still silent.

“You’re exactly right,” my mother says.

And in this moment, I realize there’s nothing left here.

I think of Harry, our cat, a thousand miles away in the ground, his small freckled chest crushed under the weight of icy New York soil. I try to imagine Garrett at the stove, stirring a pot of ramen with the industrial-sized ladle he’d stolen from work. Small bits of

memory rise up in my chest and stick to the back of my ribs. I imagine my body with a long zipper down the back, like a prom dress. I clasp my hand around the back of my neck exactly where Jaime's was hours earlier.

As a child, I was convinced I would grow up to be a man like my father. I was excited for it. I practiced introducing myself in the mirror with the names of boys in my class. Samuel, Josh, David, Ben. At night, I dreamed that I could climb trees and swim with my shirt off. I would wake up confused and elated, only to remember who I was. Who I had resigned to be.

I stand up and leave my mother's kitchen. The doorknob is cold in my hand. I step through the door and my mother calls something after me, but I don't listen.

The world outside is bright and silent. I tilt my head towards the sun. When I open my eyes, star-shaped flashes the color of ripe blueberries rise from the bottom of my vision.

I step off the front porch. The mottled pieces of tile that my father has laid out as a makeshift walkway sink into the wet earth. Still partially blinded by the sunlight, I catch my toe against one of the square tiles and fall to my knees. My hands are covered in mud, stuck to my fingers like wet taffy. In fifth grade, my teacher had us mix water and dirt together before attempting to strain the mixture with a wire colander. No matter how hard we tried, she said, the water would never be entirely clear again.

## A GOOD HEAD

Joseph

1994

Carrying a good head is when front runners in a pack run tightly abreast to pick up changes  
in the fox's direction.

---

A few weeks after Skye's tenth birthday, I lost my job at the ranch. Came in from the last night watch of the season to find I was laid off, no severance, nothing.

I didn't tell Maureen for weeks. I took up the habit, while in dingy bars in Jackson in the middle of the day, inventing lives I never lived. I introduced myself as Matt or William and spoke of my tortured childhood in places I'd never been. I told of drug-addicted mothers and siblings with developmental disorders, I was Canadian and British and French, I'd met celebrities or committed huge acts of bravery, pulled cousins from burning brush fires in the California wilderness, offered a cigarette to Morrissey at a show in New York in the 80s.

Sometimes the men I stepped into were chivalrous and brave, ex-military men looking to "get away from it all." Sometimes they were down on their luck nomads who'd hated the rich and stole from the "man" whenever possible. Whenever I felt most lost, the

men I invented were desperately sad or violent. They'd drink four beers and start a fight with the bartender about something inane. He'd spilled my beer a little when handing it to me or played a station that I didn't like. None of those men were me, that was the important part. I was a father with a wife and two children at home. I never got angry. That's simply not who I was.

...

The boy was born first. Skye a few years later after much trying. Never took much of a liking to me. Cried when I held him, cried when Maureen left. I could do nothing about it. I tried the simple stuff. I bought him baseballs and mitts, and a beautiful sleek two speed kids bike. He cried every time he got near it. Maybe it was because I was there too. Or because I was watching. He played in Little League for a while. It got him out of the house and out of his head, with all the boys in his grade. I remember Tom standing by the plate, bat in hand. Black hair curled around the edge of his tiny pale blue cap. He swung and missed. After the third swing, he collapsed. Folded like a card table on the dusty ball field. I carried him back to the car, his tiny chin resting on my shoulder. Skye and her mother hadn't gone to that game, a daycare conflict, probably. I set Tom in the front seat of the car, his body limp as a puppet's. It was late in the season, snow on the road. He wasn't going back.

...

My own father was a hard man. Grew up in the mountains of Western North Carolina on a forty acre farm with ten other siblings. His father was a pastor but died when Dad was fourteen. Lung cancer. The farm upkeep fell to him and his two brothers. He worked for everything he had the first half of his life, then drank away the rest of it.



When I was sixteen years old and Jon almost eighteen, my father quit drinking. Found God again. Said he started to see ghosts passing through the walls of the old house. Dead family members warned him against the rest of his life to come. Sober, my father felt he was able to see the miracles his father had preached about. His reformation plan would be wasted on Jon, already set on his path. But I had a chance. He forced me to attend church every Sunday and Wednesday, youth group every other free evening. I didn't fit in with the other kids there, the boys with blistered acne scars on their cheeks, their necks spilling over their collars.

My brother eventually dropped out and moved to the city. I spent two years doing what my father wanted. Made good grades and dated a girl from the youth group, Sandra, who smelled strongly of salami and sweat through her turtlenecks at movies. Every night, my father reminded me he was proud that I wasn't like my brother. Even now, I can remember the sound of the heavy wooden door dragging across the thick carpet. The moon in the window. I lay awake, my hands on my chest. I couldn't think anything other than: run. ...

Around a month after I got fired from the ranch, I was at the Blue Ghost, a little pub on the outside of town. I was in a rage that day. Thomas had thrown a tantrum the night before that kept Maureen and me up for hours. I'd barely slept. When I walked in the bar, two ranchers sat at a square two-person table by the window drinking pale beers the color of piss, a small bowl of peanuts between them. I took a seat and ordered my drink. I pulled the whiskey between my teeth, watching the men by the window in the mirrored wall behind the bar. They were around my age, with ginger beards that matched closely enough, they

could've been brothers, but something told me they weren't. The paint stains on their jackets were the same color, as if they worked the same job.

The bowl of peanuts poised exactly between them, I tried to listen to their conversation. Learned they'd both been recently laid off as well and were looking for work, maybe south of here, maybe out toward Cody. Their hands hovered over the bowl, each waiting its turn. Careful not to touch the other.

I watched. My second whiskey was long gone. My body tensed with each movement they made, increasingly aware of how cautious their dance was. Through the smoke stained mirror, that being when people could still smoke in bars in Wyoming, I saw the tips of their pointer fingers touch going for one of the few peanuts caked in salt still left in the bowl. I pushed my chair back, heard the hard rusted metal screech across the cement floor.

They stood at the same time I did, by this point, us being the only men left in the bar. I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror. I didn't recognize it. I was uncertain of which version of which man I was inhabiting that day. All I knew was the body I lived in at home was split open, and some other persona had infiltrated, swam to the surface.

"Fucking fags," I spat. Tried to be tough and look the men in their eyes but I couldn't. Even the words weren't mine, just regurgitated from my father.

Unsure of me, the men stood side by side in front of their table. They looked like birds on a phone line, considering flight.

I said it again and walked out the door. Didn't look at the men again. The sun outside was bright enough to shock me back into the man I thought I was. I briefly considered turning back, apologizing, but it wasn't worth it. The man back there wasn't me, I decided.

..

When I arrived home that night, to my small yellow house on the hill with my wife and two young children, I ate my broccolini and sat through Thomas's tantrum and Skye's impending silence.

Maureen worried about her. Skye hardly spoke or cried before the age of eight. A stubborn streak that ran a mile deep. A strange child, but of my same skin. Our faces almost exactly mirrored one another's. Even at that age, I could see my deep circles under her eyes, my taut mouth and full cheeks. I didn't share her Mother's worry about Skye's aloof nature, her tendency to withdraw. She was sent to counter her brother's outright force.

As I watched her pick at her scalloped potatoes that night, I wondered who she was when she was somewhere else. I wanted to infiltrate her head, just for a moment. Like the various iterations of the men I had been in bars over those months, I wished to live in her skin, to poke around in her world, feel it tangibly for myself. I had no desire to know anyone else in this way; but since she was born with my likeness so plainly displayed on her face, I worried she was too much like me. That she'd fall into the same traps I would. Raising her wasn't enough. I wanted to give her a way out.

...

I told Maureen about the job after about two months, when my savings dried up and I couldn't push the power bill out any further.

"So what have you been doing for two months?" she asked. She was peeling carrots over our kitchen sink.

"Trying to find work."

I couldn't tell her about the drives. The men at the bar. She wouldn't be angry, exactly, but wouldn't understand. She'd always known exactly who she was. She trusted herself more than I ever could.

"You never found anything?" she said and looked up from peeling the carrots. A crease dug into her forehead.

"I went all the way to Cody, Jackson. There's nothing," I said. It was partly the truth. "Don't know what else to do."

"The bank can always use me," she said and rinsed her hands off under the water. "We don't have enough money to waste time."

"I know."

She wiped her hands on the striped rag hanging from the refrigerator handle and leaned against the counter, opposite from me.

"You can stay home with Thomas and Skye while you look."

"Okay," I said, "I will."

I put my hands on the sides of her waist. She didn't shrug off my touch.

She turned and looked me hard in the eye. "is something else going on? You seem different."

I kept my hands where they were, but loosened my grip.

Then, a flash of the two men at the bar. The bright light outside. It wasn't me, I rationalized. My body was split. There was the man I was then, and the one I am now. Of the same skin but entirely different, irrevocably changed.

"There's nothing."

...

Skye got sick a few weeks into my job hunt. I stayed home. Skye wanted to go to school, but her mother wouldn't allow it. Didn't want to be responsible for giving everyone else the flu. For the first few days, I watched TV on the couch, checked on her once every couple of hours. Each time, she was curled up in her bed in one of my old shirts pulled over her knees, a book laid flat in front of her. She didn't ask for much. Soup, orange juice, a can of ginger ale every so often. The days began to run together.

I decided it would do her some good to get out of the house. We piled up in the truck with blankets and orange slices and drove south to the small set of glacial lakes that bordered the park. I went there with Maureen a few times, early in our marriage. It would be too cold for us to swim, but we could walk around. Eat the lunches I'd packed. Sure Skye'd packed her book, I slid a copy of *The Old Man and the Sea* into our backpack with the tomato sandwiches.

Skye came down the stairs in an old pair of jeans her mother used to wear and one of my old canvas jackets that came down to her knees. She was short for her age then, and the jeans hem dragged on the floor. Skye's clothes were always an amalgamation of others; nearly everything she wore through puberty and into her high school years was borrowed. First, my stuff, then Maureen's, then eventually Jaime's.

The only thing she wore as her own were the huge black work boots we found together at a Salvation Army in Bozeman. She must've been fifteen or so, and we went looking for a new warm coat for her brother - he couldn't stand shopping. There would be a tantrum in minutes, his thick head of curls bobbing across the parking lot headed for the car.

The boots were steel-toed with thick silver brackets to hold the laces. I remarked that I'd never seen a pair that small, or in a women's size. She begged me to buy them, said she'd

get a job to pay me back. I shrugged and got them. Didn't tell Maureen, and noticed how she scowled when Skye wore them to school the next day. But her mother didn't say anything, she didn't know they were Skye's.

...

At the lake, we parked by the shore and ate our sandwiches in silence, watching the wind sew ripples across the lake. We drifted between conversations, but stayed in silence for most of the day. Read our books on the beach, never taking off our jackets.

After a while, I noticed a fox slipping between the trees on the opposite shore. He was young. His head barely grazed the low hanging branches of the trees that lined the water. My father had hunted growing up, mostly for sport. In the time after his father had died, he said, although his mother never asked him to, he'd wandered into the woods alone with his shotgun when he got off from school. Brought home a few rabbits, a couple of squirrels.

"Do you see the fox over there?" I asked Skye, certain what I wanted to do.

She looked up, squinted across the lake.

"Yeah," she said, "why?"

"Feels like now is as good of a time as any to teach you how to shoot," I said and stood up to get my thin-barreled shotgun out of the truck.

The fox made his way around the lake, only a hundred yards or so from us now, still in sight. Skye got up from her place on the beach and we walked up the muddy bank above us to get a better angle. It made sense to shoot down; it would be easier for her to aim.

We picked a place as the fox rounded our side of the lake. I adjusted the sight in front of Skye, made sure the stock was firmly poised against her shoulder. I didn't have earplugs but warned her it'd be loud.

When the fox was right underneath us, its small body illuminated at the back, like a silhouette; I told her to fire. She didn't move, didn't flinch, just pulled it. The fox yelped.

Skye stood up suddenly, her usual cool demeanor broken by the sound. She ran down to the water, the mud flying in neat circles off the backs of her sneakers.

When I reached the shore, Skye was crouched over his body with tears in her eyes. She looked sad, sliced open, small. I was reminded, as I often forgot, that she was ten years old. A child. I should not have brought the gun. All of it began to sour as the blood spilled outward from the body - our quiet kindness at home, our time reading by the shore, her smile when I told her I'd packed ginger ale and extra pickles.

"I killed him," she said.

"I know, I didn't mean for you to."

She was angry then, brushed the dirt off her hands onto her jeans leaving wide brown streaks, like paint.

"Well, I did," she said. "I want to go home."

She started walking toward the truck. She held her anger the same as me. Locked it up tight somewhere until it boiled over and spilled out. She opened the door of the truck and slammed it hard. She took off my jacket and wrapped her arms around her waist, shivering.

I sat on the shore next to the body of the fox. I wanted more time.

I'd never seen an animal die with its eyes closed. He must have blinked when he heard the sound of the gun. There was a round, nearly perfect wound from the bullet in his shoulder. The blood splattered outward like a fist in flour. I couldn't take my eyes off the wound. I thought of my father in his green armchair. I imagined my father as a child, plowing into the rocky North Carolina soil. In the memory, which was not mine, I traced my

eyes up and down his body. Found the sweat on his temple, the cowlick of hair on the top of his head. Same as mine. I closed my eyes. Dug my body further into the smooth rocks by the shore.

The fox looked peaceful. I wondered who would find him, if some ranger would move him or if he'd get dragged away by another animal. I wanted it to matter where he ended up.

The water lapped up on his small white feet in short, slow waves. My daughter cried in the car. My wife was at home with our son. The fox on the beach was dead and my daughter killed him.

I stood up and got in the driver's seat. Skye didn't look at me, didn't say anything. I put the car in reverse and backed out of the space. Branches hit the back window, but I pretended not to notice.

After half an hour, Skye was still crying. Her body was hunched over in her seat, her forehead grazing the tops of her knees.

"You're going to be okay," I said.

She didn't look at me.

"You need to stop before we get home."

She let out a high pitchy sob. Pulled her arms tighter around herself.

"Skye, you're cold. Put the jacket back on. Talk to me."

She didn't even look up. We passed through a tunnel. The world inside grew dark for a moment. Out of a childish habit, I held my breath.

"Skye. Talk."



Two more seconds of darkness, then we were out. The world outside seemed brighter than it was before. Skye refused to speak the entire drive home.

When we walked inside the house, Maureen was making dinner, a pot roast with garlic potatoes. Skye sat at the kitchen table.

“Mom, when will dinner be ready?”

Maureen turned to smile at her daughter.

“Give it just a minute. Are you feeling better?”

Skye looked over at me, knowing the trouble I would be in if we told her Mother about the fox.

“A little bit,” she said. “I want to go to school tomorrow.”

“Well, let’s wait and see how you feel in the morning,” Maureen said.

Skye nodded.

When it was time to sit down for dinner, Skye ate so fast she barely took a breath. Afterwards, Maureen heard her throwing up in the bathroom that joined her and her brother’s room.

“Poor girl,” she said when she came to bed. “I’ve never seen her so sick.”

I never told Maureen about the fox. Skye hasn’t either. It remains between us, an unlikely cord neither of us wishes to sever.

“She’ll feel better,” I said to my wife then, as I turned over in bed. “All we can do is wait.”

## THE BLANK

Jaime

2003

A blank is used to denote a covert that does not contain a fox.

---

I have a big family, so growing up, everyone I knew either died or left. Before Mom got sick, we went to five or six funerals a year. Mostly aunts and cousins, no one we really knew well. Skye usually came, awkward and pulling at the hem of the dress her mother made her wear.

I liked the funerals because they were the only excuse we ever had to buy new clothes. Mom didn't want me seen in the same outfit. My favorite was black satin, inappropriate. Mom would make me wear a cardigan over it when the actual day came, but I didn't mind. I knew what was underneath. I still remember the feeling of the thin fabric falling over my shoulders in the Macy's dressing room, like I was trying on a new skin. I insisted on carrying the shopping bag with the thin strap over my shoulder like I'd seen girls do in movies.

I wore that dress until I was sixteen and the seam on the side burst. I tried mending it with a sewing machine we kept in the basement, but it was no use, the satin kept piling under the weight.

Skye and I went thrift shopping in mourning of the lost dress. When we walked into the store, we immediately split to our separate sides, as was our routine. Skye looked through

the men's section for the good button-ups and jackets while I scoured the women's for jeans and dresses. We met in the middle after a while to evaluate and pick what we wanted from the other's finds.

I put on a fitted floral dress over my t-shirt and jeans. The fabric bunched a little at the sides. "What do you think?"

She shifted her weight to her other foot and turned her head to the side, inspecting.

"You look pretty," she said, "like usual."

"That's not a real answer."

She sighed, shrugging off the oversized denim jacket she was wearing to try on a checkered brown coat with shoulder pads. She turned away from me and toward the mirror.

"Well, it's mine," she said.

I moved to stand behind her in the mirror. She was a little taller, her shoulders and hips a little wider than my own. Back then, I had dreams I disappeared beneath her while we slept. That a hole would open up underneath us, but it was only I who fell inside. In the dream, I watched as she turned over, moved in her sleep. She never fell in with me. I was alone.

We checked out, and Skye stashed her stuff in the backseat of my car until she got to school the next day after passing her mother's inspection, free then to put on the collared shirts and oversized sweaters she liked. Although I know she hated it, I always envied that her Mother cared what she wore. Mine never gave my outfit so much as a passing look unless it was expensive looking and she assumed I'd stolen it.

Life with Skye never felt quite real. She was drifting, always. Toward what, I don't know. She never belonged in Bozeman, or even Montana at all. People here pride themselves

on their grit. The ability to push down into the soil and come up with something that's useful. Skye needed to be somewhere where she could slip out of her skin when she wanted. She needed to go out onto the street a different person each day. Inside, she was always caught in a changing tide. I felt it.

When we were kids, I used to joke that I could put my head on her chest and hear the ocean, like a conch shell. Usually, she'd play along with the game. But when we were around thirteen, we were laying in her bed after we'd woken up. She wore one of her Dad's old shirts, a thin white one with a huge green graphic of the Queen is Dead album cover across the chest. I always envied that shirt, or else envied having a father around to borrow a shirt from.

Skye was reading Steinbeck. I moved the book out of her hands and put my head in the center of her chest, played like I was listening. But I was only there for a moment before she pushed me off her and marched like an angry child to the bathroom down the hall. When she returned, I apologized, unaware I'd hit a nerve. She shook her head and said it didn't matter. She went over to her closet and pulled on a huge sweatshirt her mother would surely make her change out of when we went downstairs for breakfast.

Over her shoulder, she said that her dad and her were going down the park to hike later that day. I tried to catch her eye, and she stormed around the room, looking for something. Light streamed in her windows, creating yellow streams of light she kept passing between and through. I wondered if she saw them or if they were only visible from my perspective.

“Skye,” I said. I wanted her to stop moving. To look at me. Suddenly, through the haze of teenage emotions, all I wanted in the world was for her to stop moving and come back to me.

“Skye,” I repeated.

She didn’t turn back, kept looking for her mystery sock or shoe or whatever it was. After another minute, I got up and left the room. Planned on going to the bathroom, but walked right past it, down the stairs and past Skye’s father reading the paper in the living room. I opened the door and walked outside to the cold; there was snow then, so I couldn’t go farther than the porch in my bare feet.

I looked out over the valley, a better view than from my house, which was closer to the center of town. The gallatins rose out of the flat expanse of earth in the distance, and until then, I don’t think I’d realized how sudden their break from the flat ground was. There wasn’t a middle ground at all, just a flat expanse and then suddenly, a mountain, puncturing the earth, placed there as if by tall gods, unsure of where to put their giant belongings. I stayed on the porch for a while. Skye never came to get me. I went back inside when my toes turned red.

...

When I was eleven, before he left us, I woke to my father kissing my cheek. It was strange, he didn’t work until the afternoons at the plant and my mother was in charge of getting me ready for school. I thought it was morning until I looked out the window and saw the streetlights were still on. The sky was milky black in the spaces between their glow.

Dad smelled unfamiliar. The smell of gasoline that usually lingered on his clothes replaced by something I would later learn was bourbon. He was never a drinker before, but

had just started a new job, and some of his friends from work were over in the basement to play poker. He took my hand and led me downstairs in my tweety bird pajamas, the footsie kind with thick plastic grips on the bottom. I couldn't see well without my glasses, so I relied on my father to guide me as we walked down the cold cement stairs.

I'd always hated our basement. When I was seven, I'd found our first cat, Oliver, dead in the corner under the shelf where we kept the Christmas decorations. He'd been missing for a week and wasn't coming when I called. Mom said cats usually go away to die, so we didn't have to worry about finding him, but there he was, curled up in a ball, his body still tightly wound like a coil of rope.

My father's work friends, it seemed, were waiting for me.

His hand still clasped in my own, he said, "this is my daughter, isn't she the prettiest thing you've ever seen?"

He smiled in a halfhearted way I didn't recognize, like the two sides of his face couldn't agree, like the man I knew wasn't there at all. I was unsure of what he promised, but I felt the weight of their eyes scanning my body as I stood, so childlike, in my pyjamas.

I pulled on his hand, my signal that I wanted to leave, but he didn't listen. He took his seat at the table and moved his free hand to my waist. He made me stay until my feet went numb. When I was finally allowed to walk myself back upstairs and go to sleep, I dreamed that their eyes were leeches. That they stuck to every inch of my body, that I was drowning in them. When I opened my eyes, all I could see was tiny wriggling bodies. A sea of bugs. I never swam to the surface.

After that, I got in the habit of checking the cabinet for new bottles of the expensive whiskey Dad only bought when his friends came. He'd have a glass or two before they came

over so they thought he always drank the nice stuff. I'd sleep over with Skye the night after finding it, knowing his friends were there.

Skye's house felt like a separate universe from my own, one that I never planned to leave. Skye's family ate dinner together, her Mom cooked things like peas and made rolls to go with the chicken. Everything arrived on the table seemingly by itself, all perfectly set, different sized forks for the salad and for the entree. Skye's mother was beautiful, with soft blown curls that fell to her collarbone. She wore dangly earrings and eyeshadow, and everything about her seemed glamorous, the opposite of my mother's ill-fitting t-shirts and jeans she'd bought on special at Walmart. Even then, I knew I wanted to grow up to be a woman like Skye's mother. Everything she did seemed magical, beyond my sense of logic. Long tribal-print skirts hid her feet, and gave her the impression she was floating on air, never even stopping to touch the ground.

Skye never seemed to appreciate it like I did though, wanted to eat dinner as quickly as possible and then retreat again to her room, where we'd read books side by side on her bed, or on opposite ends, so we could press the soles of our feet together, as if then, we were no longer two separate people, but twins conjoined at birth.

After a while of reading like this, she'd turn to me and ask, "So what do you think the complications of the operation will be?"

I'd act surprised for a moment, pretending I didn't understand the game. She'd smile and push her feet against mine, press her toes in between my own.

"Well, of course, you won't be able to walk for weeks, but we insist the recovery take place together. You will be placed on a diet of cream soda and toffee popcorn and are only

allowed to watch “I Love Lucy” reruns,” I’d say and keep going, until I’d listed everything I loved and Skye hated.

At this point Skye would groan, pushing until both our toes turned white from the strain. It was like tug of war, or chicken, a game of who would give first. The rules that followed were unspoken. Whoever’s feet collapsed first would be the one who’d sneak downstairs and take the package of sour gummy worms out of the cabinet where Skye’s mother hid them behind all the medicines and vitamins.

The winner would then be responsible for choosing the movie we’d watch on Skye’s portable TV/VCR set her father had inherited when the last ranch where he’d worked closed. It came with hours of nature videos the guys would keep on and watch during their breaks. Most were about Yellowstone or the Tetons, but Skye and I liked the ones about faraway places best, Alaska or Western China or the Sayan mountains in Siberia. Whoever won got to choose the nature documentaries we’d watch but also, one of the four movies Skye had convinced her father to buy from the dollar bin at the Safeway.

I usually chose Chitty Chitty Bang Bang when I won, but Skye liked The Rescuers best. I lost more often than not back then, but sometimes Skye still chose Chitty Chitty Bang Bang for me, pretended to like it as much as I did.

My favorite time of the nights spent at Skye’s house was right after she put the tape in the player and turned off the lights. Her room got darker than mine did at night, as she was farther away from any neighboring houses, her windows turned away from the main road and toward the forest. I loved the moment where we could sink into the dark together, our fingers interlaced beneath the covers.



Our bodies then our own, but still of the same skin, left over from years of sharing. She fell asleep first, her eyes dampening and breath deepening halfway through - no matter the movie. I thought she was so beautiful then. Her still heavy cheeks sinking towards the pillows, her small birdlike chest rising and falling under the covers. She never let go of my hand, as if even in sleep, she wanted to be sure I never left.

...

At the fair when I met Michael, my high school boyfriend, I left Skye standing alone to go talk to him by the other riders. I remember turning and looking back at her by herself, her long black hair messy at the nape of her neck. She looked delicate in her hoodie and denim jacket, her hands shoved deep into her pockets. I stood watching Michael and his friends hug and slap each other's backs, their boots sunk deep in mud, thinking about Skye smoking a cigarette by herself. After a moment, Michael came over to me, his eyes wide, taking me in big gulps, like the discount icees Skye and I got from the Stop and Shop on Tuesday nights. We drank them until our mouths turned blue. Until our tongues burned from sugar. She would drive me home, both of us clutching our bellies from the poison, laughing so hard we could burst.

...

Spring of senior year. Skye was on her way out, already been accepted to NYU for the next year. I could tell she was excited. It hurt me how easily she was willing to go. I guess I'd assumed she'd stay. Stay here with me for the rest of her life. Both of us rotting in my mother's house that smelled of saline and cigarettes. I hadn't thought beyond the next day for the past few years, but I knew I couldn't leave Mom the way she was.

Back then, she could still walk if she'd eaten a good dinner the night before and slept well, on her back, like the doctor told her. But, more often than not, she was confined to her wheelchair or the walker we used sometimes when her legs got tight from sitting in the chair. She had a brother she visited sometimes. He'd get out of rehab and come pick her up, and they'd spend a few nights together in Bozeman. Our huge family had dwindled to just him by the time I was seventeen. There wasn't anyone to take over for me if I suddenly decided to up and leave.

My mother wanted me to go to college, something she never got to do, but she couldn't ask without implicating her well-being in the mix. Sometimes, she'd fall into these spells of insisting on doing things for both of us and got angry if I intervened. I'd watch from the couch as she'd make ham sandwiches in the kitchen, nearly slumped over the linoleum counter to balance herself, her hands shaking as she tried to spread the mustard.

I knew it was wrong, but I was so angry at her in those moments. They became a reminder of how I could never leave, even if I wanted to. From my position on the couch, I couldn't help but play out the next thirty years of my life.

That's when I thought about Skye the most. When I returned to my fantasy of us in a tiny apartment with a cat and basil on the windowsill. As I slid deeper into the folds of the couch, the smell of souring deli ham filling our apartment like smoke, I wished for a different ending.

I wanted Skye and me to be together in some city I'd never been. I imagined us sunbathing in the park, hunting vintage shops for the best jackets and used books. Skye was always there, even when she wasn't. I wondered if that's what love was. I'm still not sure.

...

The day before Skye left for New York the summer after graduation, she came over to say goodbye. She'd worked outside the park that summer, and I remember how thin she was. She was a hiking guide and spent all day guiding wealthy families on the trails near the hyper-expensive lodges on the outskirts of Yellowstone. Her white t-shirt, stretched at the collar, hung off her collarbone. Her bony ankles grazed the tops of her beat-up Adidas sneakers.

We sat on my porch. It was in the afternoon, the metal rods of our lawn chairs hot to the touch from the day in the sun. "When do you actually head out?"

She leaned forward in her chair, took the hair tie on her wrist to tie her hair into a small bun at the nape of her neck.

"Tomorrow morning" she said.

I stood and walked inside to grab two beers from the fridge. When I came back, she was doubled over, her head was between her knees.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "Skye."

She turned and looked up at me. I noticed a new freckle on the tip of her nose.

"I'm good," she said, shrugging her hand off. "I just, I have to tell you something."

"What?" I asked. Handed her the beer and sat back down on the porch chair.

"I don't have any idea who I am," she said, leaning back and closing her eyes.

"You don't--"

"I'm not finished," she said, taking a breath. "I have to tell someone."

"You'll come back," I interjected.

"I know, it's just that, whatever this person is," she gestured to her body, "I'm not her, this isn't it. I have dreams--"

She opened her eyes and looked at me. I nodded, motioning for her to continue.

“In the dreams,” she said and took another breath, “I’m a boy and I have bigger hands, wider knuckles, and you and I, you and I are swimming and I don’t have to wear a shirt.”

“I don’t--” I tried to interject.

She stood up and waved her hands as she talked.

“There’s pictures, I’ve seen them on the computer at the library, of boys who used to be like me. This,” she said, and looked at her reflection in our front porch window. “This isn’t it.”

She sat down and untied her hair from the bun. Pushed it back and tied it up again.

“Skye,” I began, “I don’t think you really know--”

“Stop,” she said. “If you’re doing that I don’t want to hear it.”

“I just--”

“I’m leaving tomorrow Jaime.”

“I know,” I said. All I could think about is how I wasn’t.

“And you’re the only person I’ve told.”

I sighed, stood up and sat on the armrest of the thick wooden rocking chair she was in. I pushed a piece of her hair behind her ear.

“What do you want me to say?”

She put her hand on my knee, and I noticed how thin she really was, her wrist barely the length of my thumb.

“I want you” she stopped. “I want you. I’m sorry, you don’t have to say anything.”

I liked her as she was.

“Let’s go inside,” I said, standing up.

“It’s nice out.”

“I have something for you,” I said and took her hand, guiding her to my room.

I’d found the tin at Goodwill. I liked how it was bare except for a thick swatch of white paint across the center. I carved our initials into the bottom with a pocket knife: JS + SM.

I didn’t say anything when I gave it to her. She spun it between her thumb and forefinger, unsure of what to do.

“It’s for polaroids,” I said.

We looked at each other.

“Say something.”

“I like it,” she said after a moment.

She sat down on my bed and set the box on my nightstand.

“I like you as you are,” I said finally, the silence swallowed up between us.

I sat next to her and put my hand on her leg, discreetly measuring the width of her thigh with my hand.

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“Okay,” I said.

She was quiet for a long time. I tried to listen to the birds outside. I stared at my room. The clothes all over the floor, the limp posters of bands I’d never seen hanging on the wall, stuck with painter’s tape. I turned back to Skye.

“I feel like I’ve never known you,” I said.

It wasn't true but I wanted to hurt her. I realized how childish my desires were. No one takes you along. They just leave.

"Come here," she said and looked at me. There were tears in her eyes.

She leaned back on the bed, her body flat and heaving. When I laid my head in the center of her chest, I felt the plastic give of the ace bandage. It was our old game. We hadn't played since the time in her room when we were thirteen. She was giving herself up, like she always had. But I wanted the opportunity to be close. I took it.

I could hear her heartbeat, loud, in my ears. We laid there for a long time. The quiet pulsing of her chest got louder and louder until it filled the room. So loud we were both swallowed by it. Consumed by the idea, rooted in her chest, that we were both alive.

I fell asleep and dreamed that I opened a window. I dreamed that Skye chose to stay.

## EARTHSTOPPING

Skye

2005

The action, process, or practice of blocking up a fox's earth before a hunt in order to prevent the fox from escaping into it is called earthstopping.

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Thick drops of water beat against the car windshield as we drive. I watch as they smack and sink, merge into one another and create rivers, before being whisked away by Jaime's new windshield wipers. She bought them last week - her Mother insisted. We've been getting a lot of rain in Montana lately.

"Do you know the way?" I ask, slouching low in my seat and putting my feet up on the dashboard. I roll down the window a bit, light my cigarette.

"Remember Keith, that guy I dated in high school?" Jaime says. Smiles, looks over at me.

"What's he got to do with getting to the airport?"

We pass under a bridge, the rain subsides for a moment. The air is full and still. Jaime holds her breath and says, "we used to have sex in the field next to it. Listen to the planes take off. It turned him on." She presses her lips together, pauses. "I think it was the only way he could get it up. We never did it in my bed."

“So, what I’m hearing is that you could get there blindfolded, with only the promise of a below average dick guiding your way.”

“You got it babe. Blindfolded,” she says and pulls her left leg up on the seat with her. Drums her fingers on the steering wheel.

Jaime dated Keith our junior year, for just a few months. He was short with curly dark hair. Invited her over to play Legends of Zelda in his Mom’s basement. She broke up with him when she met Michael. Her longest relationship, the only boy who would ever really matter.

Michael and Jaime met at the state fair the summer before junior year. Jaime and I always drove up together to go see the bullriders, eat the food. Jaime loved the cotton candy, and I, the huge prize winning watermelons we’d lug home. Slice open, eat with salt and goat cheese for weeks.

Michael was a freshman rider, only his second year competing. Later, she would say she liked his thin black boots, how he wore a smaller belt buckle than the rest of the new guys. They’d been dating for a few months before he hit her for the first time. In the stomach, where no one would be able to see the bruise that rippled and stretched outward, like a pebble dropped in still water.

She came to my house afterward, said he’d turned cold, manipulative. That he’d apologized after. I hated him for not just doing it, but for how cliché it all seemed. He was sweet when Jaime’s mom was around. He helped her down the stairs, in and out of her wheelchair for dinner. He came over to clean out the gutters, sweep the porch. But in an instant, he’d turn on Jaime, for no reason. The way he hit her was calculated, intentional. Never in front of anyone, never anywhere anyone would see. Jaime made a habit of coming



to my house afterward, sneaking in through my window. I held her for a while, telling her she was safe over and over until she cried herself to sleep.

The only time he was violent in public was after I cut my hair for the school play senior year. Jaime and I were walking to the bar in the dark, my arm around her shoulder, when he pushed me to the ground from behind. He hadn't recognized me with my short hair, my cross country hoodie and gym shorts on. I split open my lip and had to tell my mom that I fell during track practice. Michael apologized, said he mistook me for another guy. They broke up a few weeks later. Jaime never explicitly said why, but I assumed it was about me.

Their breakup was in March, the spring before we graduated. I was already committed to NYU and she was planning on taking classes at Montana State in the fall. For those last few months, I barely saw her. I could tell she was already gone, or felt I was. She'd disappear for days at a time, show up after school with her car packed and insist I go with her to the park, to the Tetons, to Bozeman so she could shoplift sunglasses from the mall.

Once, on one of those days, on main street in Bozeman, two evangelists stopped us to ask us for a church donation. Both of them were women wearing long white linen dresses with huge cross necklaces around their necks.

I shook my head no and avoided their eyes just as I heard Jaime ask, "sure, how much?"

The women were surprised, and looked both of us up and down before the taller one spoke, "however much the lord moves you."

They cast their eyes downward, suddenly humble. Jaime dug in her pockets for change.

“What is it exactly that the money goes toward?” Jaime asked and handed her two crumpled bills.

“Wine for Sunday services, support for the congregation in hard times,” the shorter one piped up.

The other woman gave her coworker a hard look before interjecting, “all of it goes to worship.”

I noticed how the shorter one’s dress was wrinkled, that she had sores on her hands. When she opened her mouth to speak, her teeth were rimmed in black.

Jaime nodded. She looked uneasy, shifting her weight between her legs. I thought about putting my hand on her shoulder, steadying her, but I stood my ground.

“My mom, she’s sick,” Jaime’s voice trembled slightly, “if you could pray for her sometimes, that’d be nice. Thank you.”

Jaime never told anyone about her mom. I was pretty sure that Michael and I were the only ones at school who knew. She never had any of her volleyball friends over after school, her mom never came to any of the games. I don’t think Jaime was ashamed exactly, but felt it was private, a family matter.

The women nodded their heads in unison. The taller woman placed a thin bible in Jaime’s hand, lingered for a moment.

“You can pray for her too dear,” the woman said.

Jaime nodded, pushed the bible into her tote bag. I stepped back, tugged gently on her arm.

“Thank you,” I said to the women as we walked away.

Jaime sighed. Kept her head down and didn’t speak until we got back to the car.

“I’m sorry Skye. I know you don’t like people like that.”

“It’s okay.”

“Good,” she said before turning the key in the ignition. Usually it took a few tries to get it started, but this time it caught almost immediately. She pulled out of the space, her hand trembling slightly on the steering wheel. We started the drive home. The car filled with dead air.

...

On the way to the airport, I take a drag of my cigarette, scoot up in my seat so I can blow it out the cracked window. Close my eyes. A few drops of rain hit my cheeks. Glancing at myself in the rearview mirror, my hair pushed up in the back, the dark circles around my eyes, deep and pronounced.

“Jaime, do I look like shit? Be honest.”

“You look like you’ve been sleeping on my couch for a week,” she says.

She puts her hand on the back of my neck, begins rubbing with her forefinger and thumb. It feels good.

“Well, tell your mom thank you again. I’ll find a way to repay her eventually,” I say. “Maybe I can come home after graduation next year. Stay with you guys for a little while, fix up the house as payment.”

“You’re always welcome. I mean it. No payment necessary.”

The car skids over a puddle and a spray of dirty water splashes against the road shoulder. In the field next to us, a few cows graze over the wet grass. The ranch is surrounded by a fence, a few thin planks of wood coated in barbed wire. Rounded and uneven bits of wire reach toward the damp spring earth, like the fence is leaning back on its

heels. Beyond the cows, I can make out a man sitting on his front porch step with his legs stretched out in front of him. It looks simple, I think, that kind of life. Fresh eggs and sore muscles in the morning. We pass the ranch. A few more spare drops of rain hit the windshield.

Jaime looks at the wide valley that stretches out on both sides. The storm is beginning to break up and I can see the sun in the distance, illuminating the west side of the mountains. I rest my cheek against the cold window, listen to the sounds of driving. The crescendo of rain under tires. The humming of the old engine, louder than it used to be. The rest of the drive passes like this, my face against the window, her hand on the back of my neck.

...

We park the car underneath the overhang in the departures area of the terminal. It smells musty and damp like a basement apartment in winter, when the snowmelt seeps into the concrete.

I open the passenger side door and look for a luggage dolly for my trunk, an antique from my German great-grandmother who escaped before the war. It's been painted several times over. Now, it's bright yellow, my mother's choice. A few flecks of paint fall off the corner when I lift it out of the backseat and place it on the curb. My father promised we'd go to Germany, to see the town where my grandmother was born, but it never happened.

The last time we did anything as a family was four years ago, when we went to Glacier National Park on the Canadian border. It was June and we stayed at a campsite by the lake. On the first day, my brothers went on a walk to find firewood. My father and I went fishing by the lake. When we walked back into camp, my arms struggling under the weight of the now-full cooler, my mother's face was so swollen she couldn't breathe.

She hadn't known she was allergic to horseflies when the bugs swarmed as she fried eggs over the small camp stove. But after the second bite, her breath began to tug the back of her throat. Three and her face began swelling, stretching out away from her bones. I stood still as my carried her to the ranger's station in the center of the campground. After she regained her breath, my mother shook with fear.

"You can't leave me like that again," she said.

For the next week, I sat silently by her side, mosquitos biting the backs of my hands.

...

I locate the dolly leaning next to the automatic glass doors. Jaime pulls my backpack out of the back seat, her hair falling out of her ponytail and into her face. Together, we lift the trunk out of the car, my hands slipping a little against the painted wood. The trunk on the ground, Jaime hands me my backpack.

"Ready to go back?" she asks, not meeting my eyes.

I stick my hand in my pocket, "guess I have to be. Plane leaves in an hour."

A few cars down, I watch a girl with a bright green frame pack get out of an old minivan. Her Mom hugs her loosely, squeezing the sides of her arms. When she turns around, she trips slightly over her bulky hiking boots before walking past Jaime and me into the terminal.

"Listen about your Mom, letting me stay - soon as I start work again, my first check is going straight to her house," I say.

"Really. Don't worry about it. Her social security covers a lot. We'll be fine."

A gust of wind blows through the overhang. Jaime turns to the wind, her t-shirt billowing behind her like a sail.

“You can still smell the wildfire,” she says and raises her eyebrows. “But the news claims they put it out last week.”

“You’re such a conspiracy theorist.”

She twirls her car keys around her pointer finger. Lets her hair loose from her ponytail.

“I wish you wouldn’t go back to school. You could stay here, work at the Beacon with me. Best bison burgers this side of the park.”

I meet her eyes. “You know I can’t.”

“I was kidding, Skye.”

The moment settles between us. Sinks. Cold air in a summer storm.

“Well, I should go,” I say and step toward her, my backpack slung over one shoulder.

“You gotta go,” she says and pulls me into a hug. Rests her head against my shoulder, her arms around my waist.

Wrapping my arms tighter around her shoulders, I trace one hand over her back. I exhale, pull away, kiss her cheek. She tastes like the face lotion we’ve been sharing for the past week, lilac and peony. Jaime places her hand firmly on the back of my neck and kisses me on the lips, her thumb pressed under my jaw. After a moment, I feel people staring and pull away.

I don’t say anything. Just grab the handle of the hand truck, and walk into the terminal. I turn back for a moment, and watch her get into the car.

Inside the airport, there’s a blast of air conditioning. I scan the room for the American check-in desk. In front of it a large man clutches his ticket tightly in his hand.

“We want a refund,” he nearly shouts at the mousy worker behind the counter.

His wife stands next to him, pretty and put together, has short, blond hair streaked with gray. A light pink tennis skirt. The man’s jeans look ironed, starched in a way I didn’t know jeans could be. I wonder if his wife irons them for him. Eventually, a tall woman with a retractable name tag attached to her shirt comes over to stand between the man and the desk attendant.

The man straightens his back and tugs the waistband of his jeans. His wife places her hand on his shoulder. A motherly gesture rather than a romantic one. The manager offers two seats in first class on their next trip, and the wife accepts. They take the new tickets and as they walk away, the husband whispers something in his wife’s ear.

Kicking the trunk out in front of me, I walk up to the counter, handing a new clerk my ID and ticket confirmation. She looks down at the ID, then back up at me, tired.

“This is you?” she asks, her voice flat.

“Yeah, a few years ago,” I reply, and my voice sounds high, small, like it’s shrinking into itself.

She looks me up and down, her eyes lingering on my chest; on my jeans slung low on my hips. In the photo, I’m wearing makeup, earrings, a low cut sweater. Things I haven’t thought about in years. I remember getting my drivers license in the mail, how my mother loved the photo, said I looked just like her - pretty. Garrett says it’s just because I’m not smiling, my eyes fixed straight into the camera, but I’ve always thought I look sad. A propped up version of myself. Like if someone could reach through the camera, I’d fall over with a single tap to my forehead.

“You can’t take that on,” she says, looking at my trunk.

“Yeah,” I say and lift it onto the metal scale next to her.

She checks the weight, types something into her computer and wraps the printed tag around the top handle.

“Thanks,” I say.

She prints out my boarding pass and hands it back to me with my ID.

I nod, carefully folding the boarding pass and putting it in the front pocket of my jeans before stick my ID back into the clear plastic insert in my wallet.

“Have a good day,” I say. She looks to the next guest.

The sun breaks through the thick plexiglass windows that face the runway. A small plane takes off, a remote control toy in the vastness of the Montana sky. In the middle of the wide aisle between the check-in desks and security, I stand still for a moment. A man waits to go through security, his loafers balanced in the palm of his hand. A couple sits under the huge airport windows, their legs crossed toward each other. A middle aged woman drinks a coffee by the bathrooms, her hands shaking.

They’re all waiting for something. I’m not sure what.

...

My flight lands just after two am, and I don’t get back to my apartment until just after three. I unlock the door quietly, trying not to wake Garrett, who has class early on Mondays. Inside, it smells familiar, like ramen noodles and stale coffee. Like the person who used to live here was shorter. Quieter. I left the window open, and a slight breeze gently lifts my posters off the wall.

I sit on my bed, noticing the comforter is askew, the sheets sticking out at the bottom. I wonder if Garrett’s sister got out of rehab again. Last time she did, I was at the club late and



came home to her asleep in my bed. I took the couch and woke up to her and Garrett arguing about ADHD pills missing from our medicine cabinet.

This morning, I woke up to birds outside Jaime's window. Her naked back in the morning light, warm in the white sheets. That feels like another person's life.

I put on a clean pair of boxers from my drawer, pull on a t-shirt and lie down on top of the made bed. I open the window. Listen to the honking, the shouts from the street below. All of it sounds distant and fluid, like I'm underwater. The window bangs against the sill in the breeze. I can smell rain.

...

Alone in Garrett's car a few days after returning to New York, the engine sputters and stalls. I turn the car off as other cars speed around me honking and yelling. I push the key into the ignition, and hear the engine turn over a few times before it finally catches and the car moves forward.

Garrett inherited this car last year and keeps it in a garage out in Queens. So far, we've only used it for "emergencies," but this morning, when we realized we both had the day off, we decided to drive it out to Long Island. Go to the cheaper thrift shops and walk on the beach. Make a day of it.

I turn my signal on and switch lanes before coming to a steady stop at the crosswalk. Noticing a small tear in my jeans, I look down and poke my finger through it. Distracted, I let off the brake and the car moves forward. I slam on the brakes, and look up to see a man holding a young baby over his shoulder, his hands placed on the child's bare back. He has long blond hair that frays at the ends and wears huge jeans with thick white stitching. He

notices me looking, and stares back. A long white scar runs from his tear duct to the bow of his lips, like a sickle blade.

“What are you staring at? Just focus on driving your damn car,” he says with a bit of a drawl, like he’s from the south.

I don’t respond. Flick my eyes up at the light. Wish for it to turn green.

“Oh, you didn’t hear me bitch? Why don’t you get out of your car so you can hear me better.”

He bangs his free hand on the hood of the car. The baby slips slightly, and he readjusts it on his shoulder, digging his nails into its back. I check to make sure the doors are locked. There’s dirt caked under his nails. Both his thumbnails are painted red.

He bangs on the hood of the car again and the sound of hollow metal echoes through the intersection. Reverberates, like a spoon dropped to the bottom of a metal can. People begin to stare. A woman walks around us on the crosswalk, giving the man a five foot breadth.

Now, he’s leaning over my front bumper so his face is only a few feet from mine. The windshield between us. He bangs again and the baby squirms in his arms. Up close, it looks younger than I first guessed, no more than six months.

Scanning his eyes over me, he yells again, “a fucking dyke. A fucking dyke that can’t learn to look away.”

He bangs on the car again and again, the baby shaking, thrown over his shoulder. He’s getting angrier, I can tell, his face red and wound up, pushed in on itself.

Frozen in my seat, I wonder if we’ll live the rest of our lives in perpetual deadlock. I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out. Garrett, a real New Yorker, always tells

me to assume people like this carry guns. If this man kills me, they would have to tell my professors, my parents. Jaime. Last year, when a NYU student hung herself in her dorm room, there was a vigil. People brought candles and sang Amazing Grace.

I curl my nails into the leather steering wheel. The light turns green. The cars around me start to move and he looks up, confused, like he's forgotten why he's there. He doesn't look at me again, just waits for the lane beside me to empty out, and finishes crossing the street.

...

The morning after the party, Jaime was sitting on the edge of her bed, fully dressed by the time I decided to get up. I stood, dizzy from the night before. I put my hand on my chest, dug my thumb under the ace bandage, secured by a closepin. I usually take it off before bed, but forgot in the midst of everything. I took a few deep breaths. When I opened my eyes, I saw Jaime was watching me.

"Does that hurt?" she asked.

She reaches out and touches the laced edge of the binding with her index finger.

"Sometimes," I said.

"Is it worth it?"

I took another deep breath. Felt the air gather in my chest. Released it.

"I think so," I said.

She shifted to the edge of the bed, spread her knees and pulled my hips between them.

I couldn't read her expression, oscillating somewhere between fear and longing.

"Can I?" she asked and placed her fingers on my stomach .

I nodded.

She undid the safety pin and unfurled the bandage until it hung limp around my waist. I looked at the tiny purple bruises that blossomed across my chest and ribs like ice rising to the top of a glass. I felt her looking at me, seeing what she'd never seen. The sun barely crested over the trees in the window, the room half-filled with light. After a moment, she wrapped her arms around my hips, and laid her head on the hard part of my chest, the gap between my breasts, not excess, just skin and bone. I wondered if my heart beating against her ear was loud. I noticed the red streaks in her hair that come out during the summer. We stayed like that for a while. When she pulled away, there were tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, the tip of her nose pink.

“I promise I'll be fine,” I said, my voice stronger, clearer than I expected.

She looked up at me and took a breath.

“I like you exactly as you are,” she said, paused.

She put two fingers under my chin and lifted it so I could look at her. I closed my eyes.

“Hey,” she said.

A long moment passed, the air in the room swelled up and filtered out.

“Talk,” she repeated.

“You don't get it,” I said and opened my eyes. “I already told you.”

“I'm not sure I want to,” she interrupted.

She stood up, walked over to her chair on the other side of the room. The sun in the window had risen. She came back, laid down next to me. She tried to hold my hand, but I refused her.

Inside me, nothing broke, but the water changed direction, sunk into new sediment and soil. And began a new course.

...

I honk once I'm outside our apartment. A door slams shut and Garrett comes rambling down the sidewalk. He walks like his legs are two steps ahead of his body. Today, he's wearing a large women's sun hat with thick purple ribbon that hangs down over his eyes. He opens the trunk and throws all our stuff in before sliding into the passenger seat next to me. Finds the lever underneath, and pushes the seat all the way back so his knees aren't touching the dashboard.

"You have trouble getting the car?" he asks, rolling down the window, changing the radio station.

"She stalled a little bit on the way here. But overall, alright. We just need to keep an eye on it," I reply, pulling my baseball hat out from the backseat and slipping it on.

We drive for a moment, Garrett listening to the car. The Cure plays quietly in the background.

"Did Grace stay a few nights while I was gone?"

"Yeah, she got out of rehab last week. But same old. We had a fight. She went to Andrew's house, they got," he pauses, holds up his fingers in air quotes, "back together."

"So she's staying with him?" I ask, change lanes. Keep my eyes on the road.

"He's such a little shit. I went over there to bring her a few things and he answered the door shirtless. His chest is gross, all caved in. And he's basically got a face tattoo, a snake that goes from his neck to his ear," Garrett shakes his head, fumbles in his pocket for something. "I would say she deserves better, but that's a stretch."

At some point, Garrett and his sister were close. I never really understood it. My brother and I barely spoke, and when we did, it was about Mom or the house, never about us. When Grace lived with us, I walked in on them playing cards together in the middle of the night. Casino. I stood there for a few minutes, watching. I know I've never been able to make him smile like that. It's like there's a lock in him that only she can unlatch.

He finds his lighter, and lights a cigarette. I motion for one and he hands me his, digs around in the box for another.

"You think she'll go back to rehab eventually?" I ask, and notice that we're out of the city.

The road broadens, the trees on either side heavy with dark green leaves. Branches hang on over the road, shaking slightly in the breeze.

"I hope so. It's what's best," he says, taking a long drag. "Oh wait, how was home, parents and all that?"

"It was fine. Stayed with my old friend most of the time, the one I told you about. She's cool, doing the same stuff."

"I don't know how you ever lived out there. Nothing at all to do," he says.

"Yeah, there wasn't much. We hiked. Watched tv."

He looks out the window for a moment, then down at his hands. Pauses.

"Was it hard for you? Growing up I mean, like the way you," he pauses, "are? I can't imagine anyone out there understanding that type of thing."

We sit in silence for a moment. A few spare drops of rain hit the windshield. Left over from the storm last night.

“It never really mattered until it did, around high school age. My parents heard rumors,” I say.

He shakes his head. Drums his fingers on his thigh.

I breathe in, “I walked out on them. My parents. And still haven’t heard anything. It’s been a week. ”

I think of the guy from earlier, banging his fists on the hood. Something unrecognizable in his eyes, rage I’ve never seen before. The baby, slipping out of his reach.

“What happened?” he asks, takes a drag, rests his hand on the windowsill.

“I don’t really know. My Mom was talking about Jaime, something about her being gay. I lost it. So I left.”

“Shit. I’m proud of you,” he says.

The car in front of me is going too slow. I pull around it, my foot slipping a little on the edge of the gas pedal.

“They wanted a girl.”

“You can’t give them that,” Garrett says.

“I want to.”

“You don’t have it to give,” he says and puts out his cigarette on the old jar lid in the center console.

A bit of ash rises between us, falls.

“You can’t be everything for everyone else,” he says.

I curl my knuckles tighter around the steering wheel. Feel that ball of weight settle at the bottom of my stomach. The road narrows, switches to two lanes instead of four. I begin

to notice the trash on the side of the road. Plastic bottles, chip bags, dirty napkins. An overturned recycling bin, a mattress.

...

The road opens up and the ocean emerges beside us. I can smell the salt, fish, oil from the barges out on the bay. I turn the stereo up, hang my arm out the open window. The speed limit changes, and I slow down, notice the folding bridge in the distance.

Garrett grabs my arm, "Skye look!"

He points to a patch of trees just beyond the road shoulder. A small fox loops in and out of the brambles. Its coat is a deep red, almost brown, the color of a dried tomato.

"You hardly ever see those out here," he says. "That's amazing."

I don't respond and watch as the fox lifts his head toward the sun. The light glitters on his fur like strips of gold.

The fox walks alongside the road, and I notice the toes of his white feet are brown, dipped in mud. He looks back at our car, watches us as we drive. After a moment, he turns and heads back into the forest. Beautiful, I think. Alright, just like that.



## Epilogue

Skye

2005

During a fox hunt, a Field Master may call out “Headland please!” - this instruction then redirects the hunt to the unplowed land at the edge of a field, near a fence.

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I’ve been in New York for a month and feel absence everywhere. In my chest. Underneath my binding. In the bend of my wrist. In my knees when I walk to class. But mostly, I feel my estrangement from home in my gut. Food refuses me. If I get it down, it forces itself back up.

In an effort to regain the agency lost in my stomach, I work more than ever. I perform four shows a week, taking on two extras at another club in Brooklyn. I get a job in the kitchen at the diner Grace, Garrett’s sister, worked at a year earlier. I fry eggs with soft yolks. I wash dishes until the cuticles around my nails peel away. I watch TV with Garrett until three in the morning. I take my finals and summer arrives, blanketing the city with a thick cloud of heat. We plan a trip to Maine, just Garrett and me. I ask for two weeks off at the end of July.

Jaime comes back in short flashes of memory. Her blue shirt laid flat on my driveway. Her freckled arm against my own, flooded by false rosy light. The soft give of her stomach under my head by the lake, closing my eyes against the white midday sun.

The first part of summer passes. I do not hear from my parents or Jaime. Many nights, I drunkenly begin a letter to her that I will never send. I write it in my head as I walk to work, take a pen and a napkin from the counter and scrawl a few lines down in the back on my break. When I get home, I neatly fold the napkins and put them in the tin she gave me. I wake up in the middle of the night and empty the tin into the garbage in a state of half-sleep.

I never think of my parents. When I do think of them, it is only to acknowledge how I never think of them.

I bind my chest tighter than ever. I do push-ups before I get dressed. Soon, small muscles ripple outwards from my shoulders, like roots breaking through thin soil. I carry a gallon jug of water with me everywhere. Soon, the line of my jaw sharpens, the veins in my hands and wrists become more prominent.

I wake in the morning in my own blood. Garrett walks in on me in the kitchen rinsing the sheets with cold water. He takes the linen from my hands and bends over the sink. When I get home from work, I find he's made my bed. When I pull back my comforter, the stain is gone.

I tape a photo that my father took of me in high school over my desk. In it, I have long hair and wear tight 80s-style leggings. In the photo, I look like a girl.

I make lists. Groceries, films I want to see. I inventory everything in the apartment. Coffee mugs, mismatched plates and bowls, glass jars that used to contain pasta sauce, Garrett's records, my books. When I make the lists, I sit at my desk and do not look at the photo. I open my window and do not look at the photo. I sit on my bed and wrap my chest and do not look at the photo.

...

Garrett and I leave for Maine on a Saturday. Portland is a five hour drive once we're out of the city, so we bring crackers and white slices of cheese. We stop for gas and sodas halfway. In the bathroom, a woman in a white polyester turtleneck asks me to leave. I do not argue with her, and walk a hundred yards into the woods to piss.

We check into a motel in Portland and decide they have the ugliest curtains we've ever seen. Garrett and I lay side by side on our shared bed (the clerk assumed we were a couple and gave us a king) and try to design uglier curtains than the beige ones that hang in the window, pockmarked with misshapen brown flecks intended to be leaves.

...

On our third day, we go hiking on a thin trail by the ocean. We're both tired in that vacation way, exhausted from doing absolutely nothing. Under Garrett's concern, I'm not binding my chest.

We walk for two hours before we reach a narrow outcropping, stretching a few hundred feet into the ocean. The waves crash on either side of the rocks, rounded on their edges from the constant force.

"Go out to the end and I'll take a photo," Garrett urges, holding his disposable camera in his left hand. He has pulled the safety cable tight around his wrist.

I roll my eyes, "Alright Mom."

He kneels in a small patch of wet sand as I walk out further, balancing the rubber soles of my sneakers between the rocks.

At the end of the headland, I allow the waves to overwhelm me. The air is salty and bitter. A few fishing boats linger in the bay. The sun has sunk beneath the trees, the horizon purpling in the distance.

Garrett develops the set the next day. As he hands the camera over to the balding cashier at CVS, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the glass soda case and realize I haven't looked at myself in days. I don't stare.

...

We go to dinner by the pier and Garrett presents the photo set, which he'd discreetly picked up from the pharmacy while I'd slept hours earlier. Most of the photos are crooked and out of focus. One of the shoreline curving toward the lighthouse we saw on our second day. Of a gull picking through the trash at the lobster shack.

The photos from yesterday are the best. There's a few of my back, framed by the long reeds on either side of the trail. One of Garrett, taken by me, holding a vacant turtle shell we found. He is smiling, and half of his hair is tied in a small bun on the top of his head.

The ones of me on the outcropping are last. I flip through a few blurry photos, until I get to the last one he took. I'm looking at the water, crouched down with one hand steadying myself on a tall rock. My face is halfway turned, my shoulders parallel with the land stretching into the sea. The sky behind me is overexposed, giving the impression that I might be floating. My breasts hang loose in my thin t-shirt but I don't mind them.

Garrett catches me staring.

"That looks like you," he says.

"It is me."

He takes a sip of his coffee. Our plates have already been cleared.

"No, I mean you're not posing or doing anything. Take it, it'll probably be worth money one day."

I fold the picture and stick it in the front pocket of my jeans.

...

We take a walk after dinner. We talk about the cute guy Garrett met at the market earlier. How the lobster is just as good as everyone says. The conversation feels easy, and I find myself talking more than I have since I got back from Montana.

When we get halfway down the pier, Garrett realizes he forgot his wallet at the restaurant. He turns back and promises to meet me at the end with ice cream cones. I walk alone, wrapping my arms around my chest, cold without my jacket.

Out of habit, I start the letter to Jaime in my head. I know I won't ever write this part down, but it relaxes me as I cut through the crowds of families, of couples holding hands, of sunburnt shoulders and shaved-ice stained lips.

I reach the end of the pier before I get past the second sentence. I don't continue, just listen as the waves crash into the industrial stakes holding the pier level, the low hum of children tugging on their parents hands to ask when they're going home.

I lean my elbows on the railing and watch the sun sink lower in the horizon. I think of something my mother told me once, about the sunset being the only time between light and dark, the one of two moments we get each day to exist between. I feel a strange sense of calm. There is nowhere to go, not now, not anytime soon. Garrett will be returning and we will have two more days like this, without the consequences of real time. And like a plane merging with its shadow, I meet the person I could be, just for a moment. What else is there? I know I will stray away from myself again, know that I will get lost and hurt and sad. But I also knew I am here now, at the end of this pier. The sea on three sides, lapping against the rails.

I turn around and Garrett is there. His curls bob a good two inches above the rest of the tourists. He is holding two ice cream cones, one in each hand. He is what I have left. I am in love with him. Not the kind of love I thought I wanted, but love nonetheless. What else is there? It might not last, but it was once good. In my mind, I see the fox by the road again. This time, his thin body disappears into brightness.

The ocean crashes around me on both sides. Garrett reaches me with our cones and hands me the chocolate one. I take a bite, the thick sugary syrup drips onto my fingers. In a moment, the sun will set and the other families will turn to go home. But Garrett and I, we will stay as long as we can.