Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Emily Gutierrez March 26th, 2014

Cicadas in Summer

by

Emily Gutierrez

Lynna Williams
Adviser

English and Creative Writing

Lynna Williams

Adviser

Jim Grimsley

Committee Member

Matthew Bernstein

Committee Member

2014

Cicadas in Summer

By

Emily Gutierrez

Lynna Williams

Adviser

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

English and Creative Writing

2014

Abstract

Cicadas in Summer
By Emily Gutierrez

A collection of personal essays all centering around the limits of knowing – knowing my family, knowing my friends, and knowing myself. Additionally, the problems of memory are threaded through the essays. Most essays center around family, with special attention paid to my parents and the presentation of their marriage and subsequence divorce. Other topics include the aftermath of 9/11 on my hometown of Summit, NJ, my romantic relationships, and my half-brother Lucien. The collection examines loss, forgiveness, going home, and above all, love.

Cicadas in Summer

By

Emily Gutierrez

Lynna Williams

Adviser

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

English and Creative Writing

2014

Acknowledgements

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart
i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

- e.e. cummings

To my mother, for always showing me that love endures above all else. I'll carry you with me always.

Table of Contents

Embedded in the Skin	1
From the Summit	18
Lovers and Friends	33
Love Him As He Is	51
Cicadas in Summer	68

Embedded in the Skin

This is the story I have been told, the one that I have always wanted to be true for my parents: that they fell in love, but that after a few years it didn't work out and they got divorced. My brother Julien came first, and then me, and we were not surprises. As children, this was of great concern for us. We needed to have been anticipated, desired, not accidents that happened in the night. But my mother always assured us that we were wanted, and that even though things hadn't worked out with my father, she wouldn't change anything because otherwise she wouldn't have us.

Of course there were things I knew that didn't seem to fit nicely into the simple explanations she offered. I used to ask her questions in order to sensationalize why their marriage fell apart. Did my father have an affair, and was there a secret family on Long Island that I didn't know about? In my mind, the explanation started to take on a mythical life of its own. And just as the end of the marriage fascinated me, I always wanted to know what grand gesture my father extended in order to rope my mother into marriage. Had he gotten down on one knee in the middle of the Plaza, or was it during a carriage ride in Central Park? How had he convinced her to say yes? But my mother would only shake her head, avoiding my eyes and clinging to that one reason as if it were a mantra she wanted to leave embedded in my skin: He can be so sweet when he wants to be.

When we were children, my older brother Julien used to explain it to me this way, in the backseat of the car or at dinner when my mom stepped away from the table: when our mother was born, dad was graduating college. Before I could do the math or ask the questions, I only knew that this was a way their age gap could be measured: not by

numbers but by experiences. By the time my mother was born, my father had already lived a lifetime.

At twenty-two, I am now the same age as my parent's age gap. Sometimes I lie awake at night and think about the lifetime of moments I've lived, the things I thought were true that I later learned were false. Twenty-two years is more than just a span of time. It is a journey of experiences that cannot be understood by simply retelling. It must be lived, and for a while, I simply couldn't grasp how my mother could be with someone so much older than her. I was always aware of their age gap, but it was just a number, something I could tell people when explaining why my parents didn't work out. I have only recently begun to consider what such a difference in age would mean within the confines of a marriage.

I have always only looked at their age difference from the perspective of my father. And in doing so, I have inadvertently given him the power in their relationship. In my mind, my father chose my mother, like a game show contestant, to be the latest woman in his life. I imagined my father as a college graduate, cradling my mother like a baby in his arms. That image of him with an infant doesn't just haunt me because of the age difference, but because it is so reminiscent of a father and daughter – a man meant to protect the person in his arms, and the woman so helpless in comparison.

Next year, I will be the same age my mother was when she met my father. After spending my whole life accepting the things she told me about their relationship, like scraps fed to a dog, I have begun to wonder what their marriage must have been like for her. For so long, I didn't press her for more details because I thought I knew enough things to fill in the blank spaces on my own. When I would ask more than my mother was willing

to give, all she would have to say was "He was so charming. You know how he can surprise you that way." And she wouldn't have to say more, because by that point I had already learned firsthand the danger in believing the extravagant promises my father made.

My mom just turned fifty, the same age my father was when I was born. Sitting at dinner and flanked by empty bottles of wine, I shared with her my observation about my age. "What would you do," I said, my finger circling my wine glass, "if I came home with a forty-five-year old and told you we were in love and getting married?" I expected her to laugh and just shake her head. My whole life she threw a fit anytime I dated anyone older than me, and I always chalked it up to my father. But this time, she only looked at me and said, "What could I do? If you love him, how am I going to stop you?" And so for the first time in my life, I have begun to imagine their relationship through my own eyes. I don't imagine myself with my father, but some version of the man that my father must have been back then: younger, healthier, richer, kinder – a man that I have only seen glimpses of. "You're a writer," my mother has said before when I couldn't wrap my head around her choices, "try to put yourself in my shoes".

❖

I am my mom at twenty-two. I am the only child in my family to go to college, and while there, I fall in love with my TA and we get married. I have braces in my wedding photo, only twenty-years-old in a long-sleeve gown that itched. His name is Harold, and it only lasts a year. He likes cocaine and running, and right after my graduation, we get divorced. The papers are still fresh when I start working at my first company. Computers have just become commonplace in offices, and it's my job to go in and train the employees.

It is a job of travel and adventure, one that takes me far away from Snellville, Georgia – the only place I have ever lived.

I am my mom as she takes off for New York City to meet Rene Gutierrez, the man who has arranged for her to train his company. He puts me up downtown, at the Marriot right next to the World Trade Centers. And after I train his employees in the basics of floppy disks and computer processing, with all the ease in the world he invites me to drinks. When I tell him that's not necessary, with a wide smile and a laugh he convinces me that it's his job to show me the city. It is the first time he makes me change my mind – the first time I ignore my instinct and allow myself to be seduced by his confidence and charm.

❖

But of course this wasn't part of the story I was told growing up. For a long time, while browsing through photos of my mom during college, I would point to the man with a mustache and ask her who he was. She would squint at the photo, take it into her hands and make the same face she made when she baked pound cake from memory. "I don't remember his name, must have been a friend of my brothers." I accepted this explanation from her, until I was thirteen and we were driving to the mall on a cold winter day. Stopped at a light, she turned to me with great urgency and said, "I was married, before your father. We got it annulled. I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

I think it was the first time I had a vague sense that my mom has had a life apart from mine. I remember feeling a deep and rotten sense of betrayal in the pit of my stomach as the light changed and we drove away. I didn't know what I was so upset about – at

thirteen, I was too young to realize that it bothered me that my mom had kept something like this from me. But as the years went on, more lies revealed themselves like clues to a detective mystery, and yet I wasn't sure if I wanted to solve the crime. "How could you not tell me this?" I asked at that stop light before it changed, and again she gave me an answer I would learn to accept: "I was ashamed."

❖

I am my mother at twenty-three, dating a man twice my age. Rene flies me to visit him a few times after our first meeting in the city. And when I have to move to Detroit for work, he helps me arrange my furniture in my new apartment. It goes on like this for a little while. There is an ease between us that I would never have expected. Compared to Harold who was childish, always wanting to get one more drink at happy hour, Rene is established in his career, motivated. He runs the NYC marathon every year and is a self-made man, an immigrant who has worked his way to the top. His skin is dark and his hair is full. He speaks three languages, Spanish to his mother and French to the businessmen that he introduces me to. He is the doorman to a whole other world that I never knew existed.

It is a casual relationship. Sometimes he visits me, and sometimes I go to him. In his absence, Harold still calls me and leaves messages on my machine. I never bother to tell him about this new man in my life, because I'm not even sure how long he will be around. It isn't until November, after I sit at Thanksgiving with my family and clutch the toilet every morning that I realize how permanent Rene might become in my life.

When I tell him I'm pregnant, there is no hesitation in his voice. He brings me to live in his house in Summit, New Jersey, a large brick white one with green shutters on a hill. In a bedroom upstairs, his oldest son Bert is preparing to move to college and greets me with downcast eyes and a grunted hello. When we move Bert into his dorm, I walk down the halls and think about how I stood in his shoes only a few years ago. Bert is the same age as my own brother.

That first Christmas, Rene's other son Lucien comes to stay with us. We pick him up from the airport at the gate. He bounces off the plane and I'm struck by how young he is. A child of seven, he is handed from the flight attendant to Rene who pulls him along. At dinner that night, Rene turns to Lucien as the sun goes down and says firmly, "Bed". Lucien looks from me to Rene, and when I offer to take him, Rene only shakes his head and points to the stairs. "Bed," he repeats, and Lucien dissolves into a puddle of hysterics. This continues until Lucien finally surrenders and sulks to his room.

There are things I know and things I don't. Rene disperses information only when he is willing, and I don't press him for answers because I know he will tell me in his own time. I know that he was married to Bert's mom until Bert was born, and then she left him. She was French Canadian, and she left Bert to be raised entirely by Rene. He is a carbon copy, the same dark hair and tan skin, laughing at whatever jokes Rene says to him in Spanish. During these conversations, I am a visitor in my own home. I walk through the rooms of this big house, picking up pictures off tables and wondering how I got here. When Lucien desperately hugs me at the airport, I pull him back and tell him I'll see him in the summer. "You only see him twice a year?" I ask Rene, and he nods silently in the car. I find out later that Rene only married Lucien's mother for a few months, right before he was

born. She was a young secretary in the city, and after it fell apart she moved with Lucien back to North Carolina. For Lucien's entire life, he has only known Rene for a week at a time.

That night I can't sleep. I think about how my belly is going to swell, and the baby nestled inside me. I tell myself that Rene has offered me his home and his heart, and that he loves his children. But my mind keeps circling back to Lucien, howling at the dinner table and Rene just sitting there, angry and pointing his finger in his face. And then I look down at my hand, my ring finger barren. For how much Rene has given me, there is one thing he can't promise. I can't be his wife, not after two divorces. He doesn't want to be married again. So I fall asleep in my bed, next to a man who was only supposed to be temporary.

❖

The story I was always told was that my parents were sitting on the couch, when my dad said suddenly, "We should get married" and that my mom agreed. They went down to the courthouse the next day and made it official. And then my brother came later, at least nine months afterwards.

But when I was eighteen, I was digging through my mom's office, searching for my Social Security card. I was applying to college, and as I flipped through birth certificates and old report cards, I found myself holding a marriage license. I only stopped to read it because it was issued in Miami, Florida. I kept skimming it. There was my father's name, and my mother's, but the date was 1994. I was born in 1991. It didn't make sense, and I kept rereading it, expecting the date to rewind itself to 1986, the year my mom had always

told me they were married. I turned it over in my hands, felt the weight of the paper between my fingers. My first reaction was that it had to be fake. Then I wondered if they had tried for a marriage renewal. And then I found myself counting backwards on my fingers, scrambling to remember the year they told me they were getting divorced. This couldn't be a marriage license, because they decided to file for divorce only a year later. I slid the paper back where it belonged and paced the house, waiting for my mom to come home.

That night, as we were sitting on the couch, I fiddled with my phone and tried to distract myself. I was afraid to ask her about it because I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer. But during a commercial break of Jeopardy, I bit my lip and turned to my mom.

"Okay, I just can't hold this in any longer," I said, and her eyes grew wide.

"Oh God, what?" she asked. She was always under the impression that I was one bad mistake away from throwing away my life.

When I told her about what I found in the office, she didn't respond right away. Instead, she just went back to her dinner.

"You must have read the date wrong, we got married before Julien was born."

"No, it said 1994. In Miami!" For some reason, the thought of them getting married in Miami made my stomach churn. It reminded me of my Abulita's house, complete with plastic furniture that stuck to my skin in the thick humidity.

She just sat there, again furrowing her brow in deep thought. "Huh," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "You must have read it wrong is all."

"Do you want me to go get it?" I asked. While I wanted her to be telling the truth, I was old enough to know that this time I had unearthed something that she had never wanted to share. More than anything, I wanted to prove I was right.

We went back and forth like this for a while, until my mom said she was exhausted and didn't want to talk about this anymore. I went to my room, and later she came and sat on my bed.

"You're right," she said. "We weren't married until you were three."

I thought back to the few moments I could remember of my parents before they got divorced. I recalled the photographs and video footage of them as a couple, and the more I thought about it, the more upset I became.

"But why?" It made me feel cheap to think that my parents weren't married when I was born. It was one thing to grow up with divorced parents, but to think that they hadn't been husband and wife when I was born made me feel like a complete and unwanted mistake.

I could tell my mom was about to cry. "He didn't want to be married, and I knew that. No one knew we weren't married. Everyone thought I was his wife. I had his name, you guys were on the insurance, joint checking, everything. We had wedding bands. But your father didn't want to be married."

As a teenager, I had always wanted to prove my mom wrong in any situation. Inside, I secretly smiled, because even as she held back tears, I knew that I had won this argument. Before my mom went to bed, she said to me, "I'm only telling you this because I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. I don't want that for you."

My remorse over finding out the truth didn't come until a few days later, when Julien called to talk about it. I was gloating on my end of the phone, recounting how I had cornered her into telling me the truth.

"Can you believe she lied about this for so long?" I said, still amazed. But Julien had a different take on it. "I feel bad for her," he said, his voice quiet, since he was living in our dad's house. "I understand why she wouldn't tell us." Listening to Julien, I thought about how bringing this up, even all these years later, had managed to hurt my mother. Even though I had been right, it had been at the expense of my mother's feelings, and even more, her appearance to her children. Suddenly I didn't feel like gloating anymore. Julien was still on the other line, his voice rising as he said, "And it makes me hate dad. What kind of man is he?"

It was a question I had asked myself before. During the divorce, my mom had abstained from talking badly about my father because she still believed that despite everything, he was the only father we were ever going to have. My dad, on the other hand, doled out the slams at my mom as if he were discussing the weather. I remember visiting him not long ago, and in the middle of breakfast he simply said to me, "You know your mother quit me. She threw me out." On its own, it didn't sound like such an insult. But I had continuously asked my father to stop talking about my mom around me, unless he had something nice to say.

"When you say those things about mom, you are hurting me," I said.

"Relax, I'm just stating a fact." My father is a firm believer that I am always overreacting.

I took a breath and rehearsed my words in my head. I had recently taken a workshop in communicating, and I could hear the instructor guiding me towards verbalizing my feelings. "I am an extension of my mom, and when you say those things and hurt her, you are really hurting me." I don't know what I expected my father to do. In my mind, the moment I finally stood up for my mother would be the one where my father suddenly saw the error of his ways, fell to his knees, and begged for my forgiveness. Instead he just huffed and looked away, only adding, "I was just trying to have a conversation."

As I've gotten older, I've come to realize that this whole situation upset me because it wasn't what I wanted for my mom. My mom deserved grand gestures and roses, not just on anniversaries but also on mundane afternoons. She deserved to be shown off and cherished, with a ring on her finger and a story of how she never saw the proposal coming. She didn't deserve to feel unwanted, to be unclaimed by my father for all those years as they played house. And by an extension, it made me question how my father viewed my brother and me. We were my mother's children, born under the name Gutierrez when in reality we belonged solely to her.

❖

I am my mom at twenty-four, giving birth to my first child. He has a tangle of red hair and fair skin. Rene and I bring him home in the heat of summer. Rene only sees Julien for about an hour in the evening, after he gets home from work. When Julien cries, I am the only one who answers. Rene never changes a diaper or gets up in the night. The only time

they spend together is a little time on the weekends, when Rene plays his old French records and rocks slowly with Julien, a dance that leaves no room for me.

We go on this way for a few years. Rene leaves me an allowance every week, and because he doesn't let me work, I begin to volunteer. Julien and I have friends that we meet up with daily for playgroup. My parents come to visit right after Julien is born, but otherwise we don't go to Georgia to visit my family. Rene calls them hillbillies, and says no son of his will be around that. When we do go on vacation, we visit Rene's mother in Miami. I lather Julien up with sunscreen and go to the beach. Rene doesn't come with us on these trips, because the office can't spare him.

Julien's hair grows long and thick. It is almost to his shoulders one day when I decide it is time for haircut. Rene doesn't want me to cut it, but I feel ridiculous leaving it so long. We go to Supercuts, and Julien sits in the airplane chair. I keep his hair in an envelope for his baby book. That night, when Rene gets home from work, he goes to Julien's crib to say goodnight. I don't say anything about the haircut, but as Rene inspects the missing tendrils, he turns to me. There is no smile or laughter as he pushes me to the floor, and my head falls back against the molding.

"How could you?" he hollers at me. Julien is screaming behind him in the crib, and all I can think is that he can see me huddled on the floor. "You don't cut the baby's hair." For days after Rene does not speak to me. I pay dearly for that haircut. Behind the closed bathroom door, I inspect the bruise on my neck, the black and blue embedded in my skin. Do I think about leaving? Of course. But where am I supposed to go? Rene has taken me away from any life I had before him. My life is in Summit now, and I have Julien to think

about. And when Rene comes to me with a gift and chocolates, and promises that things will be different in the future, I believe him because this is the Rene I met so long ago.

❖

In college I took a class on domestic violence. By that point, my mom was working with a domestic violence nonprofit, and we often talked about the material I was learning. One night, when we met for dinner, I said to her, "Dad has a lot of the tendencies that we talk about. The way he gives people the silent treatment especially."

I had just learned how abuse didn't just have to be physical. I knew that my father had managed to control my mom through her finances and intimidation, but I could never imagine him putting his hands on her. I have only known my father in his old age, usually bent over and hobbling due to gout. And as much as I hated to admit it, I never imagined my mom as a woman who would take that from a man. I have only known my mother as independent, running the New York City marathon the year her divorce became finalized just to prove she could do it. My parents could never have been in an abusive relationship.

When I asked her why she never told me my father's physical abuse, she just shook her head. "And what would I say? He is the only father you are ever going to have. I wouldn't want you to have to think of him in a different way because of something that happened between us."

A short while later, I went to visit my father. It was a pretty routine trip. He took me to the mall and we went to dinner, but otherwise I stayed in my room and he sat at his desk. One day, when we were driving, he started fiddling with the radio and almost swerved into another lane. I completely lost it. I yelled at him for being irresponsible, I

told him to the watch the road and I slammed the car door when we got back to the house. We retreated to our separate corners, but later he knocked on my door and came in. His hair was streaked with grey, his round glasses were lopsided and his sweater was stained from whatever he'd eaten all week. On my desk was a picture of him holding me when I was born. His body was small and muscular, and his suit was crisp with a red tie.

"Did I do something to upset you?" he asked me, but I couldn't take my eyes off his photograph. I realized I was mad at him for something that had happened before my lifetime. I wondered if this was why my mom had never told me about their relationship, because she was right – it was hurting my father and me in the present. Looking at my father in the photograph, I realized that he was not a man apart from the one that stood in front of me. Our parents do not leave their former selves in the past. They carry those people with them, with all those mistakes and heartache, and we are born in the midst of great tragedy.

"Have I done something to hurt you?" he asked again, but I only shook my head. I couldn't tell him that the wounds of yesterday don't heal with time. When you least expect it, you will find them torn open and exposed.

"No," I said, shifting my eyes and closing my door. And it was true, because what I had said to him before was selfish at its core. Yes, he hurt me when he hurt my mother. But her pain was not something that could be split and shared among her children. What I hated to admit to myself was that we were the real reasons she suffered all those years. Without us, my father would have probably only been a story she told over cocktail dinners or to whatever man ended up whisking her off her feet. That man named Rene that was almost the same age as her father, old and rich with a mane of black hair that took her out

once in New York City. A man of charm and wit that she never called back that time, who fell away into the darkness of her memory. A man who made her smile, nothing more.

❖

I cannot be my mother as she plans her escape, when my father is at work. I cannot imagine how she felt as she took a taxi to the airport with my brother, clutching money she borrowed from a friend because she had none of her own. I can't imagine how her hands must have shook when she wrote my father the note that she was leaving him and left it for him to find on his return from work. I can't imagine being twenty-eight and pregnant again by a man that was nearly fifty.

I cannot be my mother as she sits at her parent's house, round and swollen as my brother plays in the pool. I can't imagine returning to my hometown with nothing to show but children by a man who would not call me his wife. I can't imagine delivering my child into the world, knowing she will not know her father.

And what is more, I can't imagine how much this hurt her, pushing against the stirrups as I tore her open. The physical pain would subside with time, but the absence of a man to sign my birth certificate and count my toes, would that sort of wound ever really heal?

So it is not hard to believe that when my father came to her shrouded in kindness and sorrow that she went back with him. As he cradled me in his arms, his only daughter, he promised her that things would be different this time. He would take her as his wife, he would be there for his children, and he would treat her with respect. He shook my grandparents' hands and told them that he was the luckiest man in the world to have their

daughter. And just like my mother had been so taken by him, my grandparents shook his hand back and thanked him for everything he had done for her.

I cannot be my mother as she returns to Summit with her new baby and is welcomed back by her old friends. They greet her as if she has been on vacation for nine months, and my father is celebrated a year later with a fiftieth birthday party. He holds me in his arms as he blows out the candles, one for me and fifty for him. In the background my mother claps and laughs with her guests, her smile too wide as she videotapes the evening. Once the guests leave and the house in empty, my father will fill it with his voice, loud and boisterous as he slams doors in my mother's face.

I cannot be my mother as she flies with him to Miami for the weekend, stands in front of the justice of the peace and takes him as her husband. A year later, she files for divorce and rightfully takes half of what is hers. In the end, her divorce will take five years while her marriage only lasted for one.

I cannot be my mother because this is not just some character from a time I've never known. I am in this story. I am crawling in the background as they argue, and I am culpable in making her stay. "Think about your daughter," my father says, and when my mom asks for a divorce he refuses because of his children. He can't lose his daughter, Emily Rene, his own name added onto mine.

I cannot be my mother because in the end, a part of me will always be my father. When she looks at me, she can't help but see the dark skin and stubborn attitude that I picked up from him. And no matter how much she will tell me that she wouldn't change a thing, a part of me wants her life to have been different.

This is the story I want for my mother, the one she never had: I want her to miss her plane to New York City. She does not meet Rene Gutierrez, and instead she keeps working for that company. She makes money of her own and eventually, when she is ready, she meets the man of her dreams. Under an impossibly bright sky he drops to his knees and asks her to be his wife. She never knows a crushing loneliness, and she never keeps her voice down for fear of upsetting him. And when she has children, he stays up late into the night holding them just so that they know who he is. He will tell them that they are loved, that they were wanted and planned, desired and cherished.

I don't worry about the fact that in this story, I might not be there. Maybe I exist as some other version of myself, and maybe I'm simply not there at all. But that's not what is important. All that matters is that in this version, my mother has a daughter, one she tells the same story to over and over again, leaving it embedded in her skin. "He is so sweet, your father," my mother will say, eyes sparkling at the ring on her finger. "He is so charming."

From the Summit

We lived in a town called Summit, at the top of a small mountain range in northern New Jersey. The air felt different up there, as if we sat so high that nothing could touch us. It was the type of place where people didn't lock their doors and kids played past dark in the street. At night, we could look out our windows and see the glow of the city in the distance, so close and yet so far away.

Growing up, I thought that every town had the things we had: gas stations that didn't allow you to pump your own gas, sidewalks on every street, dads that walked home from the train station every evening as the daylight waned. In the heart of downtown sat the train station, waiting to take us across the river into New York City. I remember my horror as I looked out the window at the sudden blackness. My brother told me we were under the water. *But what if something bad happens*, I asked, and my mom hushed him. She took my hand. *Nothing's going to happen*, she said, in some varying form every time, the way moms do when you are too young to consider all the what-ifs of the world.

And so we grew up in this place, nestled in the treetops, some 17 miles from New York City, sending our fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, neighbors and friends across the river every morning, sometimes saying goodbye but mostly just assuming that we would see them at the end of the day.

❖

It is the first week of school, and I am miserable. We had to move classrooms from the third floor, where the fourth graders are usually housed, back to the first floor with the

baby kindergarteners that still pee themselves in the bathroom. Our classroom materials are still in boxes, and Mrs. Barretti, the worst of the three teachers I could have been dealt, the one that never liked my brother so therefore could never like me, is writing something on the chalkboard. Our teaching aide, who suspiciously wears the same red sweater every day, is sitting on the furnace by the windows, peering out the blinds every few seconds. She must be ready for recess too. Airplanes blare overhead louder than usual, but the airport isn't far away. I've been there a bunch of times already. Michael Watts, the resident crier in our class, is sitting a few desks away from me.

Mrs. Friend, our principal, comes to the door with a special announcement. This always means something exciting like a snow day or some sort of excuse to go home from school. We sit on the edge of our seats, the tennis balls on the feet of our chairs pulsing with our anticipation. As she gets to the news – that they are already gone, that they already fell – Michael Watts bursts into tears, his face in his hands. My first instinct is to laugh at Michael Watts, but no one else titters at his cries, and then someone is saying, "But my mom works there," and someone else has a hand raised, to ask a question. But Mrs. Friend, who will retire a year later – maybe from the stress of this day – has to leave, she has only told the first floor, and there are three more to go.

At recess, we dangle on the monkey bars and hypothesize who could have done this. Of course it was Japan, because we just learned about Pearl Harbor last year. But it could also be France or England. After all, England could still want us back. Someone brings up the Nazis, but they are all gone now, so that is doubtful. As the day drags on, people slowly go home, but my mother does not come. A few miles away, at her office by the train station, she has decided that the safest place for me is school. She knows that while I'm there, I'm

safe from the unfolding horror looping the news channels. Eventually it is just me and three other kids in my class, sitting awkwardly in the music room, shaking tambourines and fingering the piano keys as the teachers stand in the doorway, voices hushed, eyes drawn down. When we are told school is cancelled the next day, we don't even get excited.

Across town, my brother is in freshman woodshop when he first learns about it. As the radio plays and he builds a bench, his class hears the misreported news that a commuter plane has hit a Tower. It is only after another Tower is hit, after students begin to receive voicemails from parents telling them that they are loved, that they are the man of the house now, that this might be goodbye, only then, is the radio turned off. An announcement comes on the loudspeaker: Anyone who has parents that work in lower Manhattan report to the guidance office. My brother follows the crowd of students, because he knows something I do not: that my father rides the express line that runs beneath the Towers. It is only after my mom picks him up early from school that he learns my dad is safe. In a misfiled email my mom finds out that my dad is in Paris this week, something none of us were even aware of. We hardly see him, his visits sporadic and unannounced, usually culminating in a Dunkin Donuts bag left at the front door on Sunday morning. It is the only proof that he had been there.

While riding my bike home that afternoon, my only worry is whether this will affect my birthday party later that week. It is already Tuesday, a hot and blue day. At home, my babysitter sits on our couch, swaddled under a blanket with her boyfriend who smells like cigarettes, glued to our television. I leave them alone, not wanting to intrude on them, and upstairs Julien and his friend Russell keep me out of his bedroom. *Do you even know what the World Trade Centers are?* Russell asks, and I say yes even though I don't. I'm in love

with Russell and want him to think I'm smart. But even my lies don't grant me access to the room, and they slam the door in my face.

Exiled and left to my own devices, I go to my mom's room and turn on the television. Each channel tells a different story: one tower stands, both are in flames, nothing is there, the city is on fire. And again I hear that name, *World Trade Centers*, even though I thought that the Twin Towers were the ones that fell. During my constant flipping, my mom calls to tell me not to turn on the TV. *But I'm already watching it*. She tells me to turn it off, we can watch it together later, and because it doesn't really make sense anyway I listen and go outside instead.

That night across the state of New Jersey, mothers and fathers don't walk home from the train. They remain trapped on the other side of the river, only getting home the next morning on limited ferry rides. They arrive in dirtied suits and tie-less shirts. Like soldiers back from war, they stammer to describe what they saw, who they can't find. My father sits up in a Paris hotel, relieved after finally getting his family on the phone through a fuzzy signal. My mom and I watch live as the Marriot Hotel, situated only a few feet from where the towers stood, falls into a plume of dust. *That is where your father and I first met,* my mom says, eyes glassy.

Before it gets dark, my mom takes us to Mountain View Drive, the road that my soccer practice is on, to the best view of the city. We have to park on a steep ravine, behind a long line of cars. My mom holds onto my shoulders as we jostle for a spot in the crowd. Before us, against a purple sky, is a veil of thick black smoke. It engulfs the entire skyline and most of the river. We stand in silence, and I crane my neck in order to see what is there.

But the billowing smoke is like a curtain, shielding us from the gaping emptiness. It leaves us to only imagine what is left standing.

Later, I sleep in my mom's bed, staying up past bedtime because school is cancelled. In the darkness of night, a thunderstorm rolls in, lighting erupts overhead, and my mom pulls me close to her, my back catching her tears as she cries.

Only later do I learn that she thinks these storms are bombs.

❖

I learned the word aftermath without realizing I was already living through my own. I only knew at age ten that bad things happened, and then they were over. You fell off your bike, and your knee healed a little while later. One day the pain was there, and then suddenly, without noticing all the work my body had gone through to fix me, I was better. I never knew that horrible things could be over and still manage to spring up and hurt me months, and even years, later.

I could tell you all the things about the aftermath of 9/11 that a lot of adults would think I missed. I've heard over and over, anytime we talk about 9/11 in an abstract way that I must have been too young to remember. Any recounting I tell them about that day can be chalked up to the looping news footage that flooded my living room every evening when my mom came home from work. But after a while, I can say my mom had to turn it off. While the rest of America sat glued to their televisions, all we had to do was look out our window at the pile of flowers in front of our neighbor's house to remember that there were still people missing.

I could tell you about the service on the village green of Summit a few days after it happened, when the town called out the names of the missing. The list was long, and with each name added, I remember my mom clutching my shoulder harder, as if each had seared her in some way. I can tell you that a week later the authorities started marking cars that had been left in the parking garage at the train station. Each car unclaimed and towed meant another person not returning to retrieve it. I can tell you how my neighbor, Mrs. Brady, had her husband's car towed to my brother's friend's house just so her kids wouldn't think their father was pulling into the driveway.

I could tell you how my father didn't get home until the dust settled, when planes began to take to the skies again in the hopes of landing on safe ground. He came straight to my house, passed the kitchen window and fell into my waiting arms. I'd never seen my dad cry, but suddenly he was weeping, holding me so tightly that I lost my breath. I could tell you how I held his hand and promised never to let go again.

I could tell you things that someone else has probably already told you, or that you saw on the news or read in a newspaper. I could tell you how bright the Memorial in Lights was six months later as they shot up into the sky from Ground Zero. I could tell you how each time it thundered I crept into my mom's bed and shook. I could tell you that when a plane crashed in Queens, we were assembled on the classroom rug and told there could possibly be another attack. This time, no one cried. We had been through the drill before. When I tell you that we were waiting for the other shoe to drop, I'm telling you that kids knew what was going on too. We could hear you adults as you sat up in the living room with your glasses of wine, telling each other about the nightmares of buildings falling with you stuck on the top floor.

I could tell you that the image of billowing black smoke engulfing a site I had known my whole life stays with me all these years later. I could tell you that my mom cries when the footage gets played to this day, because she regrets having let me see it as a child. *So many of your fears,* she has said to me as I have refused to board a plane*, I didn't know at the time how much it would affect you. I just couldn't stop watching*. And in her defense, I only tell her that it's not her fault. None of us could.

But these were just things that happened around me. During the car ride to school, I listened to voicemails of victims leaving last words to their loved ones, and while it made me sad, it didn't happen to me. I never even worried that my father could be in danger. I didn't have any concept of underground subway systems or the inner workings of New York City. These were terrible things I saw, but it was just one day, a bad one that had ended and not brought forth more fury. Summit held its breath but slowly released it as we towed cars away and arranged funerals for empty coffins.

Aftermath is a painful friend. She slips into your life when you are your most vulnerable and comforts you with the promise that things have gone back to normal. She puts you at ease, whispers in your ear to lay back and relax as she takes care of you. Often, aftermath comes shrouded in the ecstasy that at the end of the day, you have survived and nothing else matters. She comes shrouded in the hope that you will awake the next day and find your life like a pair of pants discarded on the floor, wrinkled but safe.

But that is not how it is, not even for a kid of ten. I first noticed that things weren't the same in my small corner of the world when my father moved to a smaller apartment. Since my parent's divorce, he had lived in a large apartment that I dreaded going to. Now, suddenly he was packing his boxes and moving right down the street from me. *So close*

that you can ride your bike all by yourself, my mom said cheerfully. I remember it being presented to me as a positive thing. *Now I can see you more*, my father said, but his face was visibly looser like a deflated balloon. I would never know the details that he shared with my mother in the months after 9/11, not until she told me years later. To this day, he has never talked about it and only says*, I thank God I wasn't there*. I understood that my father was giving up his office in New York City and moving his business to Summit – to his own apartment, in fact. I assumed it was safer this way, and besides, my mom worked right in town anyway. How could I know that when my father made it to his downtown office, he found it covered in a thick grey ash that clung to his clothes? He packed his boxes himself, coughing with the thickness of the air, and brought the remnants of the business he had built back to his one-bedroom apartment. How could I know as my parents sat up late into the night arguing about the mortgage payment, that horseback riding lessons didn't fall out of the sky? When you are a kid, the world is presented one way, and even when tragedy strikes you imagine that like an unruly kid in class, it will tire itself out and go back to the way it should be.

At ten-years-old, you don't realize that the life you have known will not follow you with all the changes that come. So when your parents sit you down on an autumn afternoon, over a year after 9/11, and tell you they are selling the house they brought you home from the hospital to, you don't think to be sad. You jump up and down at the excitement of a new room and maybe a finished basement. You don't see the way your father tears up when his credit card gets declined at the diner, and you don't understand why your mother is so angry with him every month as the bills pile up by the phone. You don't know that this house was promised to her until you turned eighteen, and you don't

understand that your father's business has been reduced to a name on a business card. You don't realize that he will never put on a crisp black suit and board the train to work. He will only shuffle around his apartment, coffee in one hand, newspaper in the other, pajama clad and restless.

It wasn't until we moved into a small house next to my elementary school that I realized this wasn't a good thing. *We don't even have a guest room*, I remember saying. I remember, during the search for new houses, my mother groaning on the phone to her family in Georgia. *It's Summit*, she said into her bulky cell phone. *If I moved out of town it would be half the price. But we can't leave here. It's our home.* And she was right. Even after we moved, I road my bike down the same streets I had always known. Our location might have changed, but there was still the ice cream shop down the road and the movie theatre in town. In all the chaos of the previous two years, I could still count on the leaves changing in autumn and the snow falling in December.

And then one day, as we drove to the mall, I looked out my window and my old house was being demolished. The whole thing was just gone, a pile of rubble on top of a hill. My mother had her head down, and I just remember looking frantically to see where my room used to be. *Did you know?* I asked, and she nodded. I don't want to draw any conclusions between my house and the towers, because it seems too grotesque a comparison. All I will say is that to see anything you loved come down weighs heavy on the heart. And at twelve-years-old, you don't care about being selfish or drowning in self-pity. You only cry because you realize that there really is no going home after all.

❖

There are moments that can never be changed. We circle back to them, knowing what will happen each time, and yet hoping that maybe the outcome will be different. We rewatch footage in the hopes that maybe this time they might not fall, and we tell ourselves that if we think about it enough, we can rebuild something that has been broken.

For me the moment is when I'm fourteen, standing in the doorway of my father's apartment. It has been four years since 9/11, and in that time my father has grown older and slower. He shaves less, and has taken to wearing the same outfit for days on end. My mom has struggled under the weight of bills, and my father has given up paying any sort of child support. My brother has gone off to college, and in his absence, my mom and I have shivered in the northern winters and planned our escape. Today we move to Georgia.

My father hands me his laptop and his maxed out credit card, to buy myself something nice. He turns to my mother, and as he glares at the floor, he only says, *please take care of her*. His voice is small and quiet, so unlike how it was when we first told him about our move. He had slammed his palm down on the table and declared that no daughter of his would move to Georgia. He had turned to me, glaring across the table. *What about me?* he asked me, and I only responded, *What about you?* a line I had heard in a movie once.

Now, as my father comes towards me, he hugs me tightly, and I feel his shoulders shake as he cries. I am the last child, and like all the ones before, it is my time to leave him. I tell myself that this move doesn't change anything. I reason that he has no right to cry. After fourteen years, after all the days that we lived so close to each other, I tell myself that he never bothered to drive down the street to see me. He holds me tightly, the same way he embraced me the day he made it back from Paris, but this time I don't hold his hand. I

only thank him for the laptop and make my way down the stairs and out to the car never bothering to look back.

I come back to this moment often, when daughters get walked down the aisles at weddings and when I get off the phone with my father. I think about how I would do it differently if I could only turn back time. I would understand that there was a difference between seeing someone and being able to see someone. I would know that the place you live and the place you are from end up vying for your definition of home. I would understand that Summit was a part of who I was, and that my father had been spared to come home to his daughter. I would take the time I was given, the gift that so many others had been robbed of, and I would hand it to my father in the hopes that we could start over.

But there is no going back. And so instead, I am forced to remember my silence as my father waved to me from the curb. On the way down to Georgia, my mom watches me in the rearview mirror. *It's just an easier life down there,* she says, but my eyes are cast back and upwards to the peaks of our hills, where Summit watches over New York. And then we are gone.

❖

Now I live in Georgia, where people pump their own gas. The land is flat, and sidewalks only exist in loops around subdivisions. There are no trains to bridge vast distances of people together. During the winter, the grass hibernates and turns yellow. Neighbors wave from their cars, and when people hear my last name, they tell me I'm so "exotic."

And when 9/11 rolls around, these are the people that put flags in their yards and write, “Never Forget” on Facebook. I don’t have the nerve to ask what it is they remember, some story on the news that happened a thousand miles away. I had never been so aware of my grief over 9/11 until I moved to Georgia, where I realized I was so alone in my feelings. And then I realized that in Summit, we didn’t need memorials or reminders because the simplest low flying plane could cause a glance of concern between strangers.

The first time I cried on the anniversary, I was sixteen. It was homeroom, and in the middle of the school news program, they stopped and showed a picture of the Towers. It was on a clear day as the sun was setting, and the light was coming between them. It reminded me of cool crisp mornings riding my bike to school. Suddenly, I felt like I couldn’t breathe, and I was as surprised as everyone else when I heard myself crying. I excused myself to the hallway, and hunched over a locker in my plaid uniform, I wondered how I had gotten there. Wasn’t I just ten, sitting at my desk as Mrs. Friend knocked on our door? No one brought it up the whole day, and I pretended it never happened.

Then, the next year, we assembled on the field at lunch to say a prayer and lower the flag to half-mast. As a lone bugle played and we put our hands on our chests, I thought to myself how stupid this was. I wanted to know why we were sad, and then I thought about how in Summit no one would ask me what was wrong because they didn’t have to be reminded about what today was. I realized, as I stood there on that field, how much I missed Summit, where this day was not some spectacle of patriotism but an ongoing thing that had not yet ended for people. As my tears flowed down my face, I hated that I had become the girl my school associated with 9/11. Between my tears I wanted to say that I had no right to cry, that my family survived, but then I thought about the world in which

they stood and how simple things seemed back then. There was a click from the yearbook camera as it captured my grief for a future page.

Later, someone asked me in the bathroom if my dad had died and if that was why I cried. I had no way to tell her, and even now I couldn't have explained that it is more than just a day but a life afterwards that I didn't expect to have. My only response then was the same one I say to people now: I don't understand how you can't cry.

❖

The only time I went to ground zero, it was by accident. It was the summer before my senior year of high school, and my two best friends Jennifer and Lindsay came with me to visit my father. He still lived in Summit, in a cheap house with train tracks in the backyard. He chauffeured us around for the week in the same clothes he slept in, hair unbrushed, schedule cleared because he hadn't worked in years. He got by only with the help of Social Security and my college fund, which got used up before I was done with high school. He dropped us off in downtown Manhattan to shop for fake purses by Canal Street and take pictures in Times Square. This was my friends' first time in the city, and they wanted to see all the tourist attractions. We trekked around in the simmering heat, and before the day was done Jennifer wanted to see Ground Zero. I tried to direct her to something else, maybe the Empire State building, even if heights made me anxious. But she was persistent, adding, *my parents told me I should go.* And so we headed south, back towards the river, until I knew we had arrived by the drilling of construction. We stood at the chained fence that barricaded Ground Zero, and Jennifer stared at the blocked view, impatient in her attempt to get a picture. *Why do they have it closed?* People jostled against

us, trying to peek through the construction. We circled around, and found shops with memorabilia and information.

Why can't we see anything? They asked, and behind my sunglasses I clenched my eyes in frustration. *Because,* I said, my voice catching at the spectacle it had become, *there is nothing to see. There's nothing there.*

For the rest of the trip, they begged me to take them back into the city. I tried to persuade them to stay in Summit and do the things I loved when I lived there. I took them to the diner I'd eaten at as a kid and brought them to a party my best childhood friend was throwing. The whole time, they sat off by themselves in the corner, bored and on their phones. *Can't we just go into New York?* they complained, but I told them that when I came home I never went into the city. *But you don't even live here anymore*, Jennifer said. Like any teenage girl, I didn't take the confrontation well and stormed off to my room. That night, as Jennifer and Lindsay slept, I snuck out with one my oldest friends. He picked me up in his brother's car and we drove down the usual streets, talking about nothing and taking sips of beer until we found ourselves parked outside my old house. The house that had been built in its place was boxy and modern.

It's hideous, I said, dropping my bottle on the sidewalk as I got out of the car. I walked over to the lawn and stared up at the path leading up to the door. They had torn up the tree that we buried on top of my first dog, Muffin. I imagined the people who built the house, some young couple with kids that wanted their dream home. In front of me was a metal house sign, with the words 39 Bedford Road glistening in bronze. I got down on my knees, dug it up, and carried it back to the car.

What are you doing? my friend asked, struggled to help me put it in the trunk.

It belongs with me, I said, and he didn't say anything else about it.

He drove me to Mountain View Drive, my favorite spot in town. We parked and walked past the giant flagpole to the rocky cliff that overlooked New York City. The distant lights bathed us in a strange yellow glow. We sat and let our legs dangle over the rocks, and I slid my hand over and held his. We didn't speak, only looked out at the gap in the skyline. At the very edge of the city, I could see the beginnings of a new skyscraper rising from downtown. In the end, I hadn't waited to see the rebuilding.

This was the way I wanted to see New York, the way I had grown up greeting her from a safe distance. As we wound our way back through town, I told myself that Jennifer was right – Summit wasn't my home anymore. It was one thing to move away and leave a place behind. But to return, year after year, to Summit and see it change made me realize that I was becoming a visitor in my own town. In my absence, houses got rebuilt and skylines were reshaped. I left one person and returned another, taking things that didn't belong to me and expecting people to instantly understand who I had become. And when I called my mom that night, tipsy with tears, she frantically asked me what was wrong.

I'm homesick, I said, my voice heavy as I traced the Bedford Road sign.

Then come home, she said to me, as if it were that easy.

No you don't understand, I said, already shaking my head. Where I wanted to go couldn't be reached by land or sea. It had to be recalled by memory, brought forth from a time I was already forgetting. It had nothing to do with where I placed my things or the address my letters were sent to. *Mom, I want to go back home.*

Lovers and Friends

It doesn't matter when the first time was. He was older, eighteen and stocky, and I was fifteen, thin from running and tan from summer. His friend picked me up at the end of my cul-de-sac, my learner's permit tucked in the back pocket of my denim skirt, proof that I was on the verge of becoming an adult. It was Labor Day weekend, and my mom was grocery shopping. I squeezed in between them, and laughed when I said, "We don't have much time."

We went to his bedroom, a square room with a futon for a bed. His parent's trailer was hidden off the main road behind shrubs and scrap metal. As an afterthought, he said, "I love you," and then we dove into it, quickly dressing when it was over so that he could rush me back home.

It doesn't matter that it was my first time. It happened the way it was supposed to, with a boy I thought I loved, someone older and troubled – someone my mom hated, a boy I cried over to my friends. He was my boyfriend only to me, a one-sided love story – the worst kind that exists. A love that was lonely and all consuming. The kind of love that left a knot in my chest on dark winter mornings when I realized he hadn't called in the night.

It only matters because it happened. It only matters because every story needs a beginning, a place the reader can flip back to and look in wonder at how far a character has come.

❖

There's the boy you sleep with to get over the boy that broke your heart.

I slept with Bledar because I wanted something safe. He was a family friend, someone I had known since I was ten. He asked me out in eighth grade and I said yes, only to change my mind ten minutes later and tell him no. Even after I moved away from New Jersey, he kept calling me to see how my new southern life in Georgia was. When I would visit we would play video games at his house. His family always told me I could stay with them if I ever needed a break from my dad.

We were both fifteen. He was pale and short, his hair puffy and red. I snuck out of my hotel room and took my mom's rental car while she was sleeping. He met me on the corner outside his house under the glow of an orange street lamp.

"Get in" I said. We drove through the empty streets. He took me to Washington's lookout, my favorite spot in town. We kept driving up and down the hill, each time turning to catch a glimpse of the New York City skyline. I played him my favorite country music songs, things from Taylor Swift that I burned onto a CD. We talked about middle school, like it was a far away place that we hardly remembered. Our brothers were in college together, fraternity brothers, and we laughed at the possibility that this made us family. What I recall from that night is not what came next, but what came first, the hours of conversation, the meaningless banter that we spread out into the darkness.

He said to me, "If you had stayed I bet we would be together."

"Maybe." I didn't really agree, not after being in love with an older guy. We were close enough where I could have told him no and everything would have still been normal. But I liked entertaining the idea of a boy that wanted to be with me, even if I had no intention of being with him.

When we got back to my hotel, I casually suggested he come up to my room. We crept passed my mom's room and snuck into mine at the end of the hall, a former broom closet that the hotel had converted into a single.

"This isn't your first time, right?" I asked when we were undressed. Suddenly, I felt nervous, as if he would judge me based on how much I knew. I realized, as I fell back against the wrinkled sheets, that I had made myself out to look like a girl that had done this so many times, and knew all the tricks, without ever really knowing how any of it worked. The first guy had shuffled over me in the dark and before I had to do anything it was over. I couldn't imagine petite Bledar taking charge.

"Yeah, once," he said, as if he were talking about a hobby like rollerblading.

He kept fiddling under the covers. The glow of the television made him look even paler than I remembered. I was getting impatient.

"What are you doing?"

"It's not fitting."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"I don't know, the other time I did it she was on top."

He rolled over and we lay there shoulder to shoulder. For a moment neither of us said anything. Then I looked over and he was laughing. At first I tried to quiet him since my mom was in the room next to us. But his laughter was contagious, and soon we were both trembling, trying to keep it in.

There is the boy that breaks your heart and there is the one that mends it. With Bledar I felt like sleeping together could be something fun. It didn't have to be wrapped up in the hopes that the other person would live up to your expectations. It could be talked

about and planned, what I wanted and what I didn't. And what was more, when it was over, I didn't expect him to plot our future or plan the next weekend. Instead we could just lay there in the dark, talking as if we were taking a car ride together.

Once, after we'd slept together a few more times, he turned to me and whispered in my ear, "I love you."

I said it back because he was my friend and I did love him. He had given me back something that I had carelessly tossed away to the first boy that would take it. But I didn't listen too closely to his words. I'd already heard them before, and I believed that people just said these things sometimes. I couldn't know how serious he was until I went back home and got the phone calls and texts, the promises to be together one day. Even as I ignored these signs, I told myself he couldn't be serious because we were so young. I remember being so aware of how childish this whole thing seemed, being fifteen and in love. It was so clichéd I couldn't stand it. And so instead of telling him that we were just friends, instead of explaining to him that I wanted to date older boys who could drive me in the bright daylight, I only told him the thing no boy wants to hear:

"I love you too, Bledar," I would say, my mind somewhere else, my other line beeping from another boy. "I love you as a friend."

❖

There have been some along the way that fade into the darkness of memory. Boys that came along at the end of long nights with friends, always conveniently showing up when I had no place to stay. Boys that offered their beds and then more, boys that were shy all night and suddenly found courage once the lights went out. Boys that fumbled to pull a

sports bra over my head, and boys that admitted between sweaty breaths that they didn't know what they were doing. Boys that felt like feverish dreams, phantoms of nights I didn't remember.

A boy I sat next to in my SAT prep class. Another that sang Justin Timberlake to me from across a pool table. The one that I met during freshman orientation. Boys that don't rest at the front of my memory but must be recalled, with a tap of the forehead and a crinkle of a smile. And each time, always with my head shaking, wondering, and admitting to whoever will listen: I forgot about him.

❖

There's the boy that is your first serious relationship.

I was sixteen, armed with a real license. I could take myself anywhere I wanted to go. He was the first guy I brought home to my mom, a good boy that played golf and had already applied to college. He dropped by my locker and let me wear his letter jacket. I baked him cookies and made him mixed CDs. And when he came over to watch a movie one night, I pounced on him. I think he lied when told me it wasn't his first time, but I never found out for sure.

He was the first boy I spent the night with, slipping from my bed into his when my mom let him spend the night in the guest room. There is sleeping together in the backseat of a car, and then there is sleeping together through the night, his arm around me, his head on my neck. How suffocating an embrace can feel, when the boy next to you decides to use your body as if it were an extension of his own. And the routine of it all, however exciting it

may feel in the moment, can bring a crushing weight with it. Kiss me before you go. Call me when you get home. Goodnight.

I love you.

After we had been dating for almost a year, his parents caught him trying to spend the night at my house. He answered the phone to their questions, and we both sat on my bed listening as they thundered down accusations. After that, they treated me like I had taken something from them that could not be given back. He told me his father asked him very seriously, Are you sleeping with her? And he said no.

And he was right, in a way. It's not the question but the way it was asked. Are you sleeping with her? No, he was not. We were sleeping with each other. Sometimes I was sleeping with him. When he was nervous about skipping class to go to his house, when I made him leave school with me, I was sleeping with him. When I got off the couch the first time and told him there was something I wanted to show him in my bedroom, I was sleeping with him. He only took my hand and followed, eager to see what I had hidden behind the door.

Of course we broke up in the typical fashion. The adventure wore off. We started to just go to sleep instead of anything else. I would close my eyes and imagine the early days, when I would look over in wonder at the boy on the other side of my bed. Sometimes I would listen to him snore and think to myself that this is what being an adult must be like. To know things about another person that they don't even know, words mumbled in sleep that only I could hear. We went on a break, which turned into a break up. We stayed friends for a while.

We never slept together again.

And it was okay. Because this is what happens in relationships. You know that they end. You know that one time, when you take off each other's clothes and look up into his face, this will be the last time you hold it close. You might not know it at the time, but you will be able to look back a few years later and realize that deep down you wanted that to be the last time. And it won't be as bad as you thought it was, because this is what you have known your whole life: that you come together only to part. That he was just a chapter in a multi-volume book, someone to be filed under the section Z for Zach, G for Grant if you order by last names instead.

He ends up being just a name, significant at the time, but a name nonetheless. A boy that made you smile, a boy that held you as a you slept, a boy you knew well for a moment and then forgot as time went on.

❖

It's not the breakups that hurt the most.

Like any story, it has to have an ending. You know that for every moment of laughter, for every second that you look over at the person next to you and feel a smile peel across your face, that for each of these moments in your relationship, there will be one that pulls you apart. There will be the time you took mushrooms together and in deep thought realized that this boy didn't know a real thing about you. There will be the drunken Christmas party where you yelled at each other, one in a tacky sweater and the other clutching a Santa hat, pointing a finger in his face and telling him you were young and wanted to have fun. The phone calls unreturned, the texts that go unread. Just as slowly as you fall in love, you find yourself moving backwards one step at a time, making sure that

each step of the way this is what you want. Until you find yourself alone at the end of the night, letting out the breath you didn't know you were holding, relieved to finally be on your own. All along, you had to know it was coming.

It's called a love story because it has to have a beginning, middle, and end. And the ending in this story never involves old age or white dresses, no wrinkled hands holding each other over a sunset-filled sky. Maybe one day, but not with this boy, each time I have told myself this is not the one.

❖

There is the boy that you think is your soul mate.

Senior year of high school, Bledar picked me up from the airport just as it started to snow. He drove me all over town showing me Christmas lights. It had been so long since I'd seen snow.

I told him I loved him, too, because I assumed these things had no shelf life, and that love didn't spoil over time. Even though it had been a few years, he had to still feel the same way. We still saw each other every time I visited my dad, even though over the summer he had brought his new girlfriend along. She was prettier than I would have thought, but I still imagined that after all this time, he might still be waiting for me.

His only answer was, "I just don't feel that way anymore."

We were parked on the side of the road. He had started to climb on top of me, peeling off my jacket, but I had asked about his girlfriend. "It's okay, because it's you." And that's when I thought it would be the perfect chance to tell him how I really felt.

"I don't understand why not." I thought that if I could just convince him then he would feel the same way.

He had no real answer for me, until I pressed him.

"You treated me like shit!" he yelled.

You don't see these things as they are happening. You only imagine that this person will take you in their arms and tell you they feel the same way. You don't realize how much time has passed, that the friendship you have formed has happened in spite of the way he felt about you romantically. That you both were not destined to cross paths at the same time you fell in love, and so you do so separately, rejected by the person you thought would welcome you.

I told him to take me home. I was crying by that point, shattered by the disillusion that comes from being let down by a stereotype everyone feeds you. That if you can be friends with a boy and sleep together, one day you will be together.

He came by a few days later. I walked out to his car, and when he went to start it his engine stalled. The car was dead in my dad's driveway.

"I guess you're stuck with me," I muttered.

All he could say was, "I love you, but not that way. I'm sorry, but I changed my mind."

When we slept together that night, it was long and labored. It was as if we wanted to prove to each other that we could still be friends, and this was something friends like us could still do. I've never understood why people call sex lovemaking when there is such violence to it. It felt as if all my anger from the past week was flowing out of me, and the harder I pushed, the deeper I let my fingers sink into his skin, the better I felt about the

choice he had made. Neither of us finished that night. We just laid next to each other in the darkness, an ellipse falling over us, the unfinished dots trekking out into the night.

❖

It is the friends that hurt the most. These are the love stories that keep me up at night, the boys that I think about in the morning as I hover between sleep and consciousness. The childhood friend, the neighbor, the boy I hated but grew to love. These are the boys that left me crying quietly to myself with the door closed so that no one would have to know. Boys that hollowed out a space for themselves in my life, filling my days with laughter and conversation and never asking for anything in return. And when I sleep with them, which eventually happens, always, it's not because I felt I needed to or because they asked. It's because they are familiar, a person that knows something about me that I never planned to say. I slip into them the same way I pull on that worn pair of pajama pants, the ones I only wear when I'm alone.

These are the relationships that leave me broken at the end of the day, because when there is no returned phone call there is no one to be angry with but myself. In a friendship, there are no clear lines, no previous discussions to ensure no one gets hurt. There are only actions at the end of the night, when the laughter pauses for a moment, a look is exchanged, and a kiss is passed between lips like a secret. There simply isn't time to stop and think that maybe this isn't the best idea. There are only friends who think they know each other until the clothes come off and the blankets become tangled. Friends who promise to stay the same without realizing there is no going back.

It's the friends that hurt the most. There is no moment in a friendship when you look at someone and realize that this is over. There is no defining moment that tells you that this is no longer what you want. There is only a friend that you miss, who still stands in front of you but now treats you differently because of a night you can't take back.

They hurt the most because there is no clear ending, only an ellipse, a relationship that never was, simply blank pages that beg to be filled with your imagination.

❖

There is the boy you keep sleeping with against your better judgment.

"You are the person I've slept with the most," Bledar said into the darkness.

"Really?"

"Yeah". We were in Bledar's room, the one right above his parents. We were trying to be quiet but it was assumed that every time I came into town I would end up in his bed. We were in college.

"Don't you think that's weird?" I asked.

"Why?"

"I don't know, shouldn't you have slept with you girlfriend the most?"

"She was away at school for most of our relationship. Besides, it wasn't really about sex with us."

"And with us it is?"

"I guess."

I thought about this for a moment. "Who was your favorite person you ever had sex with?"

"You," he said.

I smiled in the dark. I thought back to the moments between us. When he took me to senior prom and we went down to the shore after.

"Remember when I drove all the way here for your graduation?" I asked.

"Yeah, I can't believe you did that."

"You're lucky I like you."

"I think it was more than that," he said.

I didn't say anything for a minute. It wasn't a secret that I had been in love with him. The summer before college, I had moved back to New Jersey just to see what would happen with us.

"It was love," I said very seriously. I became aware of how naked I was and pulled the covers closer. "I had to get it out of my system."

If I were writing our story, this would be the part where he reached across the bed and smoothed back my hair. He would take me in his arms and tell me that after all this time, he had finally changed his mind. He would say that he loved me more than friends, that I was the one, the same way he used to talk when we were still kids. But instead we just ended up falling asleep. In the morning, we had sex again before my brother picked me up from his house. It wasn't until I was in the car that I realized throughout the whole night, Bledar hadn't kissed me once.

❖

There was the boy that wanted to marry me.

He was older, twenty-five when I was twenty-one. I was in college, always dressed for some costume party, and he was a mechanic in a greasy jumpsuit. He used to make me laugh a lot, his impersonations of people loud and exaggerated. His hair was long and he drove a motorcycle. I considered him to be fun, someone that I could do things with for now. His family invited me on their vacations. When his cousin died, I went to the funeral and held his hand. My mom put him on our Christmas card. Every time I called him on the phone, he would answer "Hey, friend."

I never understood people when they said they were in a serious relationship. To me, that sounded like a horrible thing, a relationship devoid of laughter and spontaneity. But one day I looked up and realized that I was spending almost every night with him. And what was worse, every time he touched me, I wanted to roll over and feign sleep. I couldn't put my finger on the moment when he stopped making me laugh, when suddenly I felt like I had to spend the night with him out of duty instead of desire. But when he looked down at me, smoothing my hair away from my face, and told me he wanted to be with me forever, what could I say? That I had tried him on like a sweater and over time he grew small and itchy? How do you tell the person that loves you that you didn't realize how serious they were?

It's only when you are breaking up that the other person starts to shower you with the love they claim they have for you. Over the phone he cried and told me that he thought we would get married, that no matter what I wanted to do in life he would follow me just so we could be together. Here was a boy saying all the things a girl should want to hear, and yet I didn't want these things from him. I realized, after so many of those exhausting phone calls, that we weren't actually friends. We shared nothing in common. He wanted me to go

to the dirt track every weekend when I wanted him to go to a book reading. He saw my interest in my education to be elitist, even though he would never actually use that word. I pretended to be interested in his work with trucks. There was faking it in bed and faking it in life. I decided I couldn't do both.

Of course he called me a liar more than anything else. He told me I was a girl who had strung him along with no intention of ever being serious. I've often looked back and wondered if he was right. I went along for longer than I should have because I didn't want to hurt him. Did I lie to him all those times at night, when he held me close? Did I smile when he talked about getting married? Did I know all along that he wasn't the one, and was I a liar for wanting to date him for now instead of marrying him later?

Our anniversary was on Valentine's Day, just a week after we broke up. He texted me and asked if we could be friends at least. I went to the tattoo parlor and got a flock of black birds behind my ear, a reminder to live freely. I told myself to not get tied down again, that this was what happened when you played house with a man that said he loved you. It made you liable to your own thoughts, especially when your own feelings about that person, whether they changed or stayed the same, no longer belonged solely to you.

Can we please be friends? He asked me so many times.

I couldn't respond, though. How do you tell a man that loves you that you were never friends in the first place?

❖

I only know the love story I don't want.

The one where a girl bumps into a stranger and they fall in love. I don't want to date a stranger. There are things that can never be known, like what they were like as a kid, awkward and scrawny. I don't want to get to know someone only within the confines of a romantic setting. I don't want to be nervous through the whole thing, wondering if I am wearing the right shirt, if he has a secret love of blondes, if he really wants to be with me. I don't want to have the experience of sleeping with this stranger for the first time, only to find out that he has a toe fetish or insists on doing it on the floor every time. I don't want to find out that the person I'm starting to like is bad in bed.

This is the love story I've been taught my whole life: that the person you will end up with is out there waiting, and one day you will happen upon them like an overturned turtle in the street, and suddenly their life will be made whole simply by you showing up at the right place and time. You will sleep together and he will be everything you ever wanted between the sheets. Those things that annoy you about him will fall away to fondness.

Of course I want to fall in love. But I don't want there to be consequences to that love. I don't want to hand over my heart too soon to someone that I don't really know. When you meet someone on the street, or when you agree to date someone in passing, there are no guarantees that this person will handle your heart with care. It is easier to simply say that you can't trust someone you don't know, and move on.

This is why, during the walk home alone at the end of the night, I pull out my phone and call a friend. As my fingers scroll through my contacts, I can already see the way the rest of the night will play out. It is the same every time. I will show up at his door, a smile wide on my face, recounting the disaster of the evening. We will talk and I will feel myself relax, my voice not as high, my hands loosening around my beer. And when he leans in to

kiss me, I will kiss him back, thinking that maybe this is the way it is supposed to be. Is this the love story that I've failed to see? I fall back against the bed, laughing with this boy as we struggle to undress each other.

For a few hours, this connection is enough to sustain me. It is like a ration I allow myself every once in a while, to get through the rest of the time when I'm alone. And when I leave in the middle of the night, my shoes in one hand and my purse in the other, I tell myself I would rather sleep by myself in my own bed. I would rather go to sleep without telling someone else goodnight. That romance is better served sporadically and safely rather than in long droves that leave me worn down.

That in the end, a friend can't really break your heart because it was never theirs at all.

❖

There is the boy the boy that breaks your heart without ever realizing it.

The last time I went to New Jersey, I hung around my dad's house in my underwear due to the heat and avoided calling Bledar. I told myself there was no point. He was in a relationship with a girl I had met that past Christmas. At the time I had been in a relationship, too, and we had tried to compare notes. I had even said, "I think he wants to marry me," and Bledar simply said, "Then you should marry him."

"What if that's not what I want?"

"Then don't do it."

"I hate relationships."

He laughed at me. "You just don't know what you want is all."

"I just want someone to have sex with that's cool."

He didn't answer, but when his phone rang his girlfriend's face lit up the screen, her hair long and straight. He had obviously found that person, and it wasn't me.

I didn't call him and this is why: we weren't friends anymore. After all this time, after the fights and the makeups, the sex late at night and rides to the airport, I realized that I was hanging onto the idea that we were friends. But I never talked to him anymore, and without sex on the table, there was nothing to bring us together. I quietly left town, and headed back home. A few weeks later he texted me randomly, and at some point in the conversation I remember saying, "Can you believe we are seniors in college?"

"No," he said. "I can't."

I fiddled with the phone for a minute. I wanted to tell him that it was crazy that we still kept in touch, that I missed the way we used to be friends. That I wanted nothing from him except the way things were before the mess of love, back in the days when I could tell him anything. But instead I just wrote back, "It's crazy how time flies."

There was a long pause. I thought he wouldn't reply, until later, a simple text: "It goes by so fast."

And he was right. One day you are a kid, stealing your mom's car and picking up your best friend outside on the curb. You sleep together with the same ease that you rode bikes or played video games. You think it's something cool, something that will bring you closer together. And for a while it might, to the point that you think it could be something more. But you never stop to consider that friendships aren't pyramids, that you can't peak at love and then descend back down to the same ground you started on. You will simply

find yourself forever looking down, your head turned back in an attempt to see how things were in a time past, a place you can't return to, and a friendship that can't be brought back.

Love Him As He Is

Voicemail received December 25th, 2012:

Hey Emily, it's Lucien. I was just calling to wish you and your mom Merry Christmas. I talked to dad earlier and he said you were doing good in school, that's awesome. I miss you. Maybe I'll come down to visit sometime. Call me and we can figure it out. I'm praying for you. I love you.

❖

One of my earliest memories is a vacation my father took me on to Puerto Rico. I was seven, and my older brothers Julien and Lucien came too. I remember only snippets of the trip: My father wearing penny loafers on the beach; a rollaway bed I slept on in the corner of the room; the Columbine shooting looping on the news; missing my mother uncontrollably, and Julien and I calling her every night from the room.

I don't remember Lucien coming into the room late at night, reeking of cigarette smoke, bumping into the bedside table loudly and waking Julien up. But I remember sitting at dinner the next evening, white linens bristling in the breeze. I don't remember the arguing that led up to my father picking up his dish, waving it across the table at Lucien, and saying, "Goddamn, I will make you eat this plate." I only remember my father breaking it against the table, and Lucien pushing his chair back, storming off as the other guests turned to look at us. "Ungrateful," my father said, and when I began to cry, he smoothed my hair back, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Who is my favorite daughter?"

❖

Voicemail Received February 4th, 2013:

"Hey Emily, it's Lucien. I was just calling to see how you were doing. I was working out at the gym the other day and I saw a guy wearing an Emory shirt and I told him my sister goes there. I told him your name, I told him to look you up. I miss you. Call me sometime."

❖

In every way that counts, my brother Lucien is an only child. He came at a time of transition for my father, between his first family and his last. His first family had given him a son, Bert, a boy who was quiet and smart, who read books in Spanish and listened to French records. Years later, my father would meet my mother and have my brother Julien and me, children who grew up in luxury in a house on top of a hill in Summit, New Jersey. Lucien came right in the middle, eleven years after his first son and eleven years before me. Lucien's mother was a secretary in the city, a fling my father had on weekends, and Lucien became a check in the mail once a month, and an airline ticket purchased twice a year. He was an afterthought, a part of my dad's life, but only a fraction and not a whole.

Lucien grew up in a household of old Southern money, with pictures of his mother in a white debutante ball gown hung above the fireplace. She remarried a gentleman and changed her last name to McAllister. When she had two more children, first Molly and then Parker, she carried them around Greensboro in double strollers while Lucien straggled behind her, tan in the summer heat from my father's Nicaraguan skin. At school, everyone

asked him if he was Mexican because of his last name Gutierrez. And Lucien shrugged his shoulders, because he had not yet learned about where his father came from. He only knew that he was different from his brother and sister, because he wasn't a McAllister. He was a half.

The way we refer to our family members says a lot about our relationships. I have a brother, Julien, and in saying that one sentence, I have claimed him as a person in my life. I have a brother, Julien that held me the day I was born and watched me nap in his old crib, out of jealously but also out of love. I have a brother, Julien, who wore matching pajamas with me on Christmas Eve and read books to me with a flashlight under the covers. I have a brother, Julien, who slammed doors in my face and dropped me on my head and told me he hated me. I have a brother, Julien, that sat with me on the sofa as our parents told us we were getting a divorce, a brother whose only questions was, "Will you separate us?" I have a brother, Julien, who shares my history, who knows me. He is my brother, and as a long as I have him, I will never be lonely.

Our relationships with our siblings are the longest relationships of our lives. We meet at birth and from that moment on they are with us for Halloweens and birthday parties, lost teeth and potty trainings. There is no divorcing our siblings. Together you will see the other marry, attend births of children, bury your parents, and march into old age. Barring death or estrangement, your sibling is your first friend, and in some cases, your last.

Lucien has never had that. His relationship with his siblings is always interrupted, and his time must always be divided between his different sets of siblings. To visit Julien and me, Lucien has to leave Molly and Parker. To spend time with Bert, he must be without

the McAllister siblings. And on the rare occasions when all the Gutierrez children are together, the four of us assembled around my father, Lucien is the only one missing another part of his family. He has never once seen all his siblings in one room together.

At the end of the day, when we group off with the people who love us the most – Bert with my father, Molly with Parker, Julien with me – there is only Lucien, standing with a phone in his hand, calling out to anyone who will answer.

❖

Voicemail Received February 11st, 2013:

Hey Emily, it's Lucien. I'm sorry to bother you. Is this still your number? I called your mom's number by mistake thinking it was your number, but she said this was your number. I'm just seeing how you are. I'm having a rough month. My girlfriend doesn't want to be with me, we had a big fight last night… she called me a loser. I don't know, what do you think I should do? Call me back if you get this, or don't, I know you're busy. I love you."

❖

I am my father's favorite child.

I came last, his only girl. He loved my mother the most of all his wives, and I am a reflection of her. He showered me with gifts from department stores and his international travels. He gave me his name, Rene, so that even if I eventually lost the Gutierrez, a part of him would always live on in me. Even now, at twenty-two, he still worries over my

slightest ailment or injury. When I had some irregular blood work come back, he sent my mother an email telling her, "I love you because I love my Emily, and I won't let anything happen to her." No matter what distance might come between my father and me, I know that he loves me. Even though that love might come with its own set of challenges and its own broken promises, I know it is there, and I hear it from him whenever we speak.

Lucien is my father's least favorite child. He doesn't have to say it: my father is a man of actions, not words. The last time I saw Lucien, he had my father's long black hair in his hands, combining it through his fingers and begging him to get it cut. My father pulled back abruptly and said, "That's inappropriate," and went on to say that it was his hair, and he would do with it as he pleased. My mom pulled me aside and said, "If you ask him, you know he will do it." So I put my hand on my father's shoulder and said, "Dad, it will look a lot better short." And he took my hand and squeezed it and said, "Anything for my daughter."

Anything for his daughter, that is what my father loves to say. Anything for his daughter, except the college tuition he spent on bad business deals. Anything for his daughter, except visiting me when I moved away. Anything for his daughter, except having a conversation that didn't revolve around money, careers, or failures. Anything for his daughter, offered at an arm's length, because to get too close is to risk my getting disappointed all over again.

And yet at least my father begins this conversation with, "Anything for my daughter." I can't imagine him ever saying this to Lucien. When Lucien fell into a drug addiction and struggled to finish high school, it was not "Anything for my son" but "What is wrong with you?" When Lucien refuses wine at dinner because he is still in recovery, it is

not “Anything for my son” but “You are weak minded.” And when Lucien called one afternoon last year to tell my dad, “I think I’m going to kill myself,” it was not “Anything to help my son” but instead, “You are selfish. I cannot talk to you like this anymore.”

To be the favorite child is to carry a heavy guilt for the ills of your siblings. Sometimes I feel obligated to reason with my father on Lucien’s behalf because no one has my father’s ear as I do. I would like to think that being the favorite, I would be a good person. And yet I know that this is not true. Maybe when I was younger, when I was a child who eagerly awaited Lucien’s visits, maybe in those days I believed I was a good sister because I didn’t know any better. When you are a child, you think that by just sharing a bloodline and a last name and occasionally telling a person you love them, that you are family. That it can all be that simple, just pointing out your brother in a crowd and saying, “That’s my older brother Lucien.” You don’t consider that your actions have consequences, and that your silence speaks louder than the “I love you” mumbled over the phone.

❖

Lucien called a few more times in the spring of 2013. I don’t have those voicemails saved. I was in college, working on papers, sleeping with boys and drinking on weekends. When he called, I didn’t want to listen to him lecture me on the dangers of bad choices. And I also didn’t feel like spending hours on the phone, listening to his problems for which I had no solutions. I told myself that he had so many other people to call, siblings much older than I was who could provide him with the answers. He became a red line on my call log, flashing in class, waking me up in the night, his name sprawled across my call screen, a name and nothing more.

❖

When I was thirteen, Lucien came to Thanksgiving at my mom's house. He was living in town, going to AA meetings and renting a room my father paid for, even though my father had a guest bedroom. Lucien was working at the print shop in town and taking his medication for depression. We had been meeting up in the mornings for runs before I went to school and he went to work. It was the most time I had spent with him in my life.

We sat down for dinner, with my father at the head of the table even though we were in my mother's house. He served me wine and tried to fill Lucien's glass, and when Lucien tried to stop him, my father only said, "Can we just have a nice meal together, please?"

We talked about nothing worth remembering, passing around sides and gorging ourselves. Eventually the talk turned to college, since Julien was a freshman at Delaware. My father turned to me and said, "My daughter could go to Harvard if she wanted to."

Lucien turned to me as well. "Or you don't have to go to school. I didn't go, and look how I turned out." We laughed together. "There's always space for you down at the print shop."

"That's not funny," my dad said, his voice deepening into a grumble.

"What? What's good enough for me isn't good enough for her?" Lucien asked. It was always hard to tell where the line between seriousness and humor crossed for Lucien. In that way, he is very similar to my father.

"You're damn right it's not good enough for my daughter. She is going to college." They exchanged words. Lucien said, "Like you even cared when I was overdosing in high

school," and my dad slammed his hand down on the table, "That's enough, I won't be attacked like this." And then Lucien was pushing his chair back, his napkin floating to the floor as he kissed my mom on the cheek and thanked her for the meal. "That's right, walk away, you are a child," my father called after him as Lucien slammed our front door shut.

Not too long after that, I went to meet Lucien for a run and he wasn't waiting on the street corner. A few days later, he quit his job and stopped taking his medication. He went into the hospital for a few days, and when he came out, he bought a bus ticket to Greensboro and never moved back to Summit. "It's better this way," my father said in his absence. But only a year later, when I was fourteen, I packed up and moved away with my mom to Georgia. As we said goodbye, he wept on my shoulder, his hands wrapped tightly around me, pleading, "Please don't go, daughter."

❖

I did manage to call Lucien for his birthday. The conversation went something like this:

"Happy Birthday Lucien!"

"Thanks."

"Thirty-two, you're so old!"

"It's not that old, is it? How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Whoa, I remember when you were like, a baby. I guess I am getting old."

"How have you been?"

"I'm okay. I'm thinking about changing my last name from Gutierrez to McAllister, my mom's last name."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I just hate having a Spanish last name, it's like, I don't speak Spanish, and I don't even really have any ties to dad. But he gets so angry if I even bring it up."

"I mean, it's just a name, Lucien. It's not going to change who you are."

"You never think about changing your last name to your mom's name?"

"Not really. It's just a last name, it's not a big deal to me."

[Silence]

"Lucien?"

[Silence]

"Are you still there?"

[Crying]

"Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry." [More crying]. "I just feel so lost. I hate living in Greensboro because everyone knows me from high school as the dropout kid. But I hate living in Summit because everyone just knows me from AA. And I can't live with dad. I can't live with my mom. I've got no one."

"You've got me."

"Yeah but you never answer, and Julien never answers, and Bert's too busy with his kids. And Molly lives in Japan and Parker lives in China. I've got no one but myself."

[Silence]

"Lucien, I'm sorry."

"Will you pray with me, right now?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Can you say a prayer?"

"Yeah. Dear God, please bless my brother Lucien on his birthday. He's struggling but he's one of the nicest people I know, and he has a good heart. Please look after him, and let him know he's not alone. Amen."

"Amen."

❖

When I was a teenager, I only considered the things Lucien was given that I was not: private boarding schools after he got kicked out of public school; fancy rehab facilities; college tuitions again and again, only for Lucien to drop out a semester later. I only saw Lucien calling, asking my father for money on the other end of the phone, and my father obliging with a swipe of a credit card. And what was more, I didn't see him doing anything worthy of a reward. I only saw myself, earning straight A's, working at Waffle House, my arms deep in dirty dishes and silverware as my hairnet snagged my neck. When I called to ask my father for my college fund to pay for Emory University, he only told me, "I no longer have it."

For a time, this was enough for me to stop talking to my father. I felt that this broken agreement was greater than any other disappointment, because it went against everything he had ever promised. When Lucien got wind of our falling out, he called me. "You're being childish. Dad is getting older. He won't be around forever. You just have to love him as he is."

I didn't deem Lucien worthy of taking advice from. "You don't know anything about it, Lucien," I said, the tears streaming down my face. "You don't know how this feels."

What I couldn't tell Lucien was how much I wanted to trade places with him. I wanted to be given the things he had, and in return, I wished that my father would stay out of my life. I envied Lucien's distance from our father, because I saw it as a buffer that saved Lucien from any real anguish. I wished that my father only sent me money without asking for more, because to give him my heart meant risking him letting me down.

For a long time, I only compared what Lucien was given against what I was not. It was as if I made a mental list of all the times my father sent Lucien money, whether he was out in California or enrolling in school in Greensboro. In my mind, each time he gave to Lucien, my father seemed to be taking something from me. It was a childish way to think. And even though it was only a few years ago, it's hard to realize as a teenager that the gift you were given instead was much more valuable. Because each time my father writes Lucien a check, his name scribbled at the bottom, the Gutierrez barely eligible, he hands it over with the words, "Now don't call me with your problems."

❖

Voicemail on March 5th, 2013:

"Hey Emily, it's your brother Lucien. I'm sorry to bother you, I don't know if this is still your number because I keep calling and getting no response. I hope this is your number. I just wanted to say hi… I haven't heard from you in a while. I was just hoping we could talk and catch up. My girlfriend and I broke up. She said I was a loser. I don't know, I

didn't really want to be with her anyway. [Pause]. If you get this, can you say a prayer for me? I could really use some help. I just feel so lonely – [message cut off].

❖

What was I doing that day that was important that I couldn't answer? Was I in the middle of writing a paper? Did I have a test to study for? Was I out to eat with friends, or sleeping in bed? Is there a reason I didn't answer my brother?

I wish I could say that I have an excuse for not answering, but I don't. There are people in our lives that we say we love, but our saying it is the extent of our relationship. We don't answer when they call, and we don't reach out to see if they are okay. We tell ourselves that someone else will fill this role, and we think that for every missed call, there will be another one that we will answer.

I only know what returned phone calls sound like, my mother on the other end asking me how my day was. I only know calling Julien on long car rides, filling the commute with small talk about his day, laughing at his jokes because they are the same ones he has been telling for years. And on weekends, when my apartment is quiet and my mind is still, I pick up the phone and call my dad because I know how happy it will make him. In this world of vast distances, the people I love try to bridge the divide with a simple gesture, their voice on the other end of the line, saying every time, "I love you, goodbye."

My mom and I love to say that we worry about Lucien, that we love him because he is a sweet guy but that he exhausts us. We talk about it over half-finished wine bottles, our speech slightly slurred, as we recount how hard it is to love Lucien. Sometimes we spend entire evenings mapping out where he went wrong, and how we would love to help. But

these are just words, things we say to each other, and if he were to call during these conversations, we would most likely ignore the call, rationalizing, "I'm too tired for this tonight."

The afternoon of March 5th, when I saw Lucien's name on my screen, I simply didn't answer. I told myself what I tell myself every time he calls: that I will call him back, but later. I negotiated that I was too busy to listen to his problems, the relationship he couldn't keep, and the struggle with his identity he couldn't mend. And so I pressed ignore. I didn't know that by the time he called me, none of his other siblings had answered either. In this way, he was an only child, forever reaching out only to find us failing to meet him half way.

So it's not hard to understand why, under the crushing weight of depression, Lucien picked up the phone to call the one person who would answer. As my father said hello, Lucien interrupted to say he was going to kill himself. Maybe he was serious, and maybe he was simply crying out for help. But what is harder to consider is that maybe he only reached that point after so many unanswered phone calls, voicemails beeping into an endless chorus of rejection. And when my father answered, he did not cry with compassion or offer a prayer like Lucien asked. Instead, he slammed down the phone, pushed it off his desk, and yelled, "Weak!" It was only after Julien found him in his study, yelling to my Abulita that her grandson was selfish, that he told Julien what Lucien had said.

When Julien called me to tell me, I asked if Lucien was okay. "Yeah, he didn't do it. But dad's not speaking to him anymore. No one is."

I imagined my father in his study, his voice thundering into his phone as he vented to his mother about his second son that could never find peace. I imagined him looking at the pictures on his desk, me in my cap and gown, Julien's fraternity composite, my brother

Bert with his wife and kids. There was no framed picture of Lucien on his desk, only a small folded snapshot of him as an infant, oblivious to the life my father would provide for him. I imagined my father, the weight his voice could carry when he was disappointed, the line going dead at the other end as Lucien cried into the receiver.

I always believed that in a loved one's time of need, I would move heaven and earth to help him. For someone else, a nicer person, a more caring sister, they would have gotten in the car and gone to see Lucien. They would have made him understand that he wasn't alone; that being a half sibling didn't mean he was an only child. At the very least, a good person would pick up the phone and call. But I am none of those things. At the end of the day, I didn't pick up the phone and call because I felt that Lucien was just having another moment, one of many that I had witnessed over my lifetime. I told myself that he was a grown man, a thirty-three year old adult that had to figure his problems out on his own.

That night, as I tucked myself into bed and hovered near sleep, I thought of Lucien, and where he was. I hoped that he was with his mother in her big house, or at an AA meeting where his voice would be heard. And as I put my hands together, kneading my fingers tightly into prayer, my only request was that he was not alone in the world.

❖

What I remember most about Lucien are those runs we shared when I was a teenager, the morning darkness still following us as we raced down the streets. For a few minutes each morning, I would turn off my music and match my breathing to his, our arms pumping through the air in symmetry. We didn't talk about the past, those tantrums at the table with dad, the napkins thrown, the plates broken. We only looked ahead into the

unseen distance. In those moments, with the sun rising at our backs, our shadows would spread out on the asphalt in front of us, and if we ran fast enough, they would blur into one another, two halves made whole.

❖

Sometimes I think that my father has four half-children, and that he is simply doing his best to give us each a piece of himself. My oldest brother Bert got my father's youth, his energetic years where he could be a father of action and sports. Julien was given his older years, the time my father has now that he is retired. In a way, they have been given the gift of time, the mundane moments of my father's life that Lucien and I simply haven't been there to witness. We chose to move away and never come back.

For Lucien, he was only given the gift of money. Money thrown at the problem in order for it to go away. Checks in the mail, credit card numbers over the phone, bills paid, tuitions covered, rents secured. My father will always make it work when it comes to Lucien's finances.

But I know now, after all this time, that the gift I was given was the most valuable of all. I was given the gift of love, a love that makes my father protective of me, a gift that makes him expect more from me because he has given me the attention to succeed. I was given the gift of his lap on a lazy afternoon, a book in his hand, reading into my ear so that I could sound out the words. I was given my father in the crowd of a concert recital, him stepping over orchestra bows in order to get closer to the stage. I was given my father ending every conversation with, "I would do anything for my daughter" and no matter how many times he says it, I know he is telling the truth.

My father is adamant that he loves his children equally. He eagerly tells me this every time I visit, even when we are just sitting in the morning quiet. It's as if he needs to convince himself more than me that we are all the same in his eyes. On those mornings when the house is silent and my father is simply sitting at his desk, his children's faces staring back from behind the glass of picture frames, I wish I could gently rest my hand on his shoulder. "Don't love him equally," I would say, repeating the advice Lucien gave me so long ago. "Love him as he is."

❖

A few weeks after Lucien said he was going to attempt suicide, I saw him at Easter. We met at my brother Bert's house in North Carolina for my nephews' baptisms. He and my father hugged tightly in the doorway, my father holding him for a moment longer. "You look good," he said, inspecting Lucien. I realized that in my entire life, I've never seen Lucien age. He always looked tan and short, his hair in the same crew cut. But today he looked tired, his skin a little looser around his eyes. When I said hi to him, I was suddenly shy, like I was being introduced to him for the first time. "It looks like you had fun on Spring Break," he said, noticing my tan. "I saw your pictures on Facebook. I always show people my smart sister."

This was the hardest part of all. Seeing Lucien in that moment, I realized what can be so easily forgotten when we don't see the people we love: how sweet they are. How much they care. When they are just a voice on the other end of the phone, there is no face to their suffering, no weight to the words they speak. But here was Lucien, my brother in the flesh, the same brother I used to wait up for expectantly on his yearly visits.

When we got to the church, I sat next to him. Everyone else in our family was at the alter, taking part in the baptism in some way. Most of the sermon was in Spanish, even though only Bert and my father could understand it. But at one point, a hymn was sung. Suddenly Lucien grabbed my hand, and I looked over and he was crying. When the song ended, the Priest read from the Bible, something about *familia*. Even when the reading ended and we were supposed to shake hands with people around us, Lucien kept holding on to me. "Can we say a prayer, real quickly?" he asked, and I nodded. "Dear Lord, thank you for letting me be here today with my sister. Watch over her, and me, because I need your help too. Amen." And I said "Amen" too, not because I believed in the power of prayer, but because I believed in bridging halves of a whole.

The next day, as I began the long drive home, I thought how different things could have been for Lucien if he had been given moments from my own childhood. As a writer, I was tempted to create a new life for him, one that would allow him to move on from the past. I would write a scene where my father took the Red Eye to see Lucien in the school play, the one where he was the tin man. My father would whistle from the audience, and clap his hands loudly the same way he did for my ballet recitals and orchestra concerts. I would insert Lucien into all of our Christmas's, and he would have more gifts to open than me and Julien combined. I would give him a sibling, a real sibling, one that shared both his parents so that he could stay up late into the night, whispering about them to the one person who could understand. And when it came time to get to know his youngest sister, Emily, I would make her a sympathetic character, a girl who returned his calls every week, a girl that ended every conversation the same way every time, "Goodbye, I love you."

Cicadas In Summer

I remember the summer the cicadas first came. I happened upon them in our driveway, with their fat wings buzzing against the asphalt. I remember the way they shed their bodies, leaving a shell of what they once were on trees and mailboxes. I would pick them up and let them crawl across my palm, wide open and willing in the evening humidity. It was the summer of 1995, and the heat wave left entire neighborhoods in darkness as the power lines buzzed in exhaustion.

At night I would hear them sing from my bedroom, the window open to relieve me from the summer heat. My mother slept next to me every night that summer, curled up with her back to the wall as I hollowed myself beside her. Before the lights went out, she would read to me from Aesop's Fables, stories that she often explained had a greater meaning. That summer, we read the fable about the cicada that sang to the ants while they harvested their food. When winter came, the ants survived and the cicada starved. "What does it mean?" I asked. But my mom was tired, turning out the light as my father walked up the stairs, each one creaking until he closed the door to their bedroom.

When my mom told me the cicadas would go under ground and not come back for seventeen years, I cried. "But I will miss them," I said. She comforted me by saying that I would see them soon. "It will go by so fast," she said, and I shook my head. And so we went outside with the video camera to record them in our driveway. My mother believed then that anything could be remembered as long as it was on film. "Say goodbye to them," she said from behind the camera, and I waved, underestimating the span of time seventeen years can fill.

❖

Recorded August 24th, 1991:

Rene looks out through the sunroom into the black night. Fireflies flicker past the windows, illuminating the darkness, like flashes of a camera. He looks down at his baby, Emily, in a white onesie, her feet bare in the summer heat. He thinks to himself that she should be wearing something more, and he holds her closer, even as her mother, Carolyn, fans herself in the doorway.

"Rene," she asks, trying to keep her voice light for the video camera. She zooms in as he begins to speak to Emily in Spanish, a rhythm of rolled lyrics that Carolyn can't understand. "Can you wave to your mother? Can you say something to your mother in Spanish?" she asks, knowing how much Rene loves to speak to his mother on the telephone. Carolyn keeps the lens framed on Rene, hoping he will wave. She hopes that the camera will act as a family friend or guest, and that Rene will flash the smile that captured her in the first place.

Rene walks past her, out of the frame with Emily still in his arms. The camera cuts off briefly, only to be restarted in the TV room. Carolyn finds Julien watching television and situates him next to his father. Emily wakes up and starts fussing in Rene's lap. He struggles to hold her in one arm and keep the other around Julien, the way Carolyn insists they be arranged. His business shirt is wrinkled, and he curses under his breath. The fatigue of the train ride into work and the long day is wearing on him. When Carolyn asks him to wave goodbye to the camera, he barks at her to be quiet for just a minute. This house used to be a peaceful place, a house of grown-ups. Now there are toys and dolls

littering the floor, the television constantly blaring. The toothpaste bottle is always left without the lid.

Carolyn asks once more, knowing that she can edit the footage later. Emily twists suddenly and Rene begins yelling at Julien to turn down the television. Carolyn grabs Emily just as Rene complains to Julien, "Taranacke, how many times have I told you, no gun movies?" Carolyn doesn't answer. The camera continues to roll, and Rene makes room so that Carolyn can sit next to him, Emily nestled between them. Carolyn waves, "Goodbye, Meme, Goodbye, Abualita." She continues to wave, even as Rene moves Julien over, stands up, and walks away from the frame, his voice barely audible as he says, "Adios, mama."

❖

My mother used to edit her home videos before she sent them to her relatives in Georgia. She often labeled these tapes by year and event, Emily Ballet 1996, Julien Baseball 1997. I remember seeing her on the floor in front of the blue screen of the television, fast-forwarding through hours of footage in order to splice a scene just right. "Why are you doing that?" I would ask, anxious to finish "101 Dalmatians." "Oh, people don't want to see all the boring stuff in our lives," she would say. "I'm just making it nice."

She always sent these nice tapes off to my grandparents without saving us a copy. We were left with the raw footage, the hours of tedious cookie baking and little league practices. It makes the task of re-watching your life much harder when you are forced to relive the monotony of it, the tiny moments that were significant at the time but fell away to bigger ones never caught on film.

❖

Recorded December 28th, 1993:

The first frame is of the New York City skyline from the turnpike. Tall buildings flash by for a moment, as Julien fiddles with the camera while Carolyn drives. One of Rene's other sons, Lucien, is visiting, his voice cracking as puberty overtakes his face with pimples and stubble. The next frame is in an elevator, as Julien and Lucien look at themselves in the reflection, the camera framing Lucien's face. They press 17, for their father's office. Emily and Carolyn are downstairs in the car waiting, but, of course, Rene is never on time. The camera cuts again, and then it is a survey of an office, with rows of empty desks. The room off the side houses their father, as he paces back and forth on the phone. Lucien zooms in on his father's name in bronze on the door, Rene Gutierrez, CEO, Industrial RE. He shoots the items on Rene's desk, an assortment of sculptures and carvings from Africa and Asia. Rene hangs up the phone and acknowledges the boys. He holds Lucien tightly for a moment longer than Julien, and he says he can't believe how tall Lucien has gotten since the summer.

Even though Carolyn is downstairs waiting, Rene plays the boys a French cassette tape, and opens letters as he sings the lyrics. Lucien takes the camera and starts surveying the office, and focuses on a wall-sized map of the world. He zooms in and finds Greensboro, points to it, and says, "There is home." He finds New York City. "This is where dad lives." And then he finds Nicaragua, zooms in, and says, "And that is where dad is from."

The camera cuts off, only to be handled by Lucien again at dinner. He focuses on Rene, who tastes wine while Carolyn arranges Emily's Lion King figurines at the other end

of the table. "You want to know the secret to success, son?" Rene asks, his heart full at the sight of three of his children at the same table. "Fundamentals." Lucien doesn't understand the statement. "Fundamentals?"

"Don't question it son," Rene says. He knows that his beliefs will take him far in this life, because they have already brought him to the top floor of Manhattan office space. He looks at Carolyn, his third wife, the one that he has the chance to make a new life with. He knows that age is just a number, and that it is never too late to reinvent himself. Carolyn never looks up, only scoots the figurines across the table, happier in a child's world than Rene's fantasy of success.

❖

My brother Julien doesn't like to watch the videos. He finds them boring, like a predictable movie that he has been forced to see too many times. My father has never really watched them. My mom transferred them all to DVDs for him for Christmas once, but they never worked on his television. When I got them to play on my laptop, he squinted at the screen and remarked, "It is too small. It hurts my head." My mother is the one that always brings them out at family gatherings, skipping over the prolonged footage of my father asleep on the couch in order to get to my brother and me singing in the bathtub. She skips over the things she doesn't want to see and instead spends hours laughing, pointing out to me the funny things Julien and I did as children. "You used to always fall asleep in that position," she will say, finger directed to the screen, teaching me about myself.

The videos fascinate me. It is the only time I've ever been able to see my parents together, and what their married life must have looked like when I was small. I only know

them after the divorce, cordial but distant, reminding the waiter taking our order that they aren't married. It's one thing to be told how it was to be married to my father, but it is another thing to see it, replayed over and over again as he grunts to any question asked. But then there are the quiet moments, briefly captured on film, his holding me in front of the windows, whispering to me in Spanish. Watch them once and you might just see a boring afternoon, children playing and a mother recording them. But to me, they are a window to the people my parents were, and the life I came from. They are a time machine, taking me to a place I can't remember, a place that feels distant but so close all at once.

There is my father, the same voice and clothing, but his hair is thicker, his skin tighter. His youth is startling, and it makes it easier to understand how my mother could have ended up with him. And in the rare moments when my mother does step out from behind the camera, it always catches me off guard how similar we really are. It is more than just the same hair and eyes, beyond just a physical resemblance. I realize that I know her more than I know myself in those videos, and that I can understand being in your twenties more than I can reconcile being a child on the floor of my old house, oblivious to the turmoil going on around me.

❖

Recorded December 25th, 1994:

Emily and Julien stare at the presents neatly assembled in front of the Christmas tree. Julien dives in first, and begins tearing away paper and shrieking at the discovery of a Macintosh Computer. Carolyn holds the camera and asks Julien to show her. She turns to survey the room, narrating for her relatives in Georgia who have never spent a Christmas

with her family. Rene is on the sofa, in boxer shorts and his work shirt from the day before. His hair is unbrushed, and he has folded the blanket and pillow that he uses during the night. They sit by his feet as Emily stumbles over to him, in a diaper and Christmas shirt.

Rene picks up a box from the tree and brings it to Emily. She can't manage the paper yet, and as she struggles, Rene asks Carolyn what time they are going to dinner. His mind is on his friends, and the party they will go to after the kids have gone to bed. "Rene, help her tear off the wrapping paper." Carolyn says, but Rene isn't listening. He reads Emily the name of the box when she manages to make a hole, spelling out Saks Fifth Avenue. He hands her a green jacket, and Carolyn exclaims, "Look how nice, Emily." Emily faces the camera, drops the jacket, and begins playing with the box. She knows it will make a nice roof for the house she is making in her bedroom. Rene picks up the jacket and folds it neatly, placing it in her lap. "Rene," Carolyn says, "when did you get her that?"

"Don't worry about it," he replies. He has never understood why she asks so many questions about things, when he only wants to give his daughter a nice gift. Carolyn wants to tell Rene that Emily will outgrow the coat in a matter of weeks, but the red light is still bleeping, and the footage is still rolling. As long as the tape plays, she has to keep her voice higher than usual, her smile wider, to show her family back home how fine things are in her corner of the world.

❖

The fable about the cicada and the ants is simple: the ants worked hard in the summer and were prepared for the winter. The cicada spent all the time singing and being

idle, and therefore deserved to die of hunger. My mother could have told me that, but she didn't.

What the fable fails to consider is that the cicada wasn't singing purely for herself. She sang for the ants while they labored. She put her needs behind those of others, in order to make their lives more enjoyable. When the cicada starved that winter, were the ants not remorseful that they hadn't tried to mend the situation? And what's more, did they not miss the song of the cicada that next summer, and the many more to come, as they worked into the night?

❖

Recorded March 25th, 1995:

The day is bright and blue, with fat thick clouds floating in the sky. The camera zooms in on Emily, arranging her stuffed animals on a swing set one at a time. "Mom," she calls, "where is Bunny?" Bunny is tossed from behind the camera and lands at Emily's feet. She picks it up and inspects him for harm, assessing that the fall did not hurt his tail. She puts him on the swings and begins pushing the animals.

From behind the camera, Carolyn checks on Julien, in the middle of a Lacrosse game. The families are lined up at the sidelines, fathers in crisply ironed polo shirts and wives in matching pastels. She likes her spot on the playground though, and she asks Emily to wave to the camera. Emily waves, and then they move on to the slides, the stuffed animals flying down one by one, until Emily comes down headfirst. She comes running to Carolyn's knees, so that only the top of her head is visible from the camera.

The footage cuts off, only to be picked up during the final minutes of the Lacrosse game. Julien is on the sidelines, his mouth guard at his feet, head under a towel to shade him from the sun. The game ends and the boys run from the field, showing their fathers the plays they managed to score, twisting their sticks in motion as Julien shuffles towards Carolyn. From behind the camera, she encourages him "Good job, honey." But Julien only drops his gear at her feet, looks behind him at the field and begins to cry. The last thing heard before the camera flicks off is, "Mommy."

❖

There is a gap in the videos between 1997-2000. Those were the years not worth remembering, the time when my mom went back to work and my dad moved out. There was no point in recording the labeling of furniture, the ottoman for Rene, the dining room table for Carolyn. Those are the years that I remember without prompting: the phone calls late at night, my mom crying in the bathroom, the fan running but her voice still audible on the other side of the door. I don't need a video camera to see Rene pulling Emily into the back of his Mercedes, yelling, "Taranacke, it is my weekend, my weekend." I don't need to see a video with Carolyn coaxing Emily out from under the bed, warning, "If you don't visit your dad this weekend, mommy will go to jail." These are moments that I wish could be erased from the footage, replaced with Halloween pageants and Christmas mornings. I wish my mom could send me the edited footage, labeled nicely, "Emily's Childhood".

The videos pick back up again, eventually, but that footage isn't worth watching. It is too recent, can be recalled too easily. I don't need to watch the Emily that I already know.

So instead I sit and press rewind, listen to film recoil in time, taking me back, seventeen years and further, until the time of the cicadas.

❖

Recorded July 1st, 1995:

Carolyn presses record, but the lens cap is still on. The frame is shrouded in darkness, with only Emily's voice audible. "What do you mean they won't come back?" Carolyn finally removes the cap and the frame is flooded in summer light, with Emily in a plaid sundress in the driveway. She stands over the insect, a fat cicada in the process of shedding its skin. Emily picks up the shell it leaves behind and puts it on her forehead. It feels rough and dry, like Papier Mâché from art class. "They only come once every seventeen years." Emily looks at her mom, her eyes wide. That is more time than she can comprehend. She can count it on her fingers, but she can't picture what that time would actually look like, spread out like the timeline in her classroom. "I'll miss them," she says, poking the alien bug with a stick. "You'll be twenty-one," Carolyn says. Carolyn knows that time is not a kind friend. She can hardly remember her own wonder at how far away certain things could feel, like the birth of a child, or the filing of a divorce.

"Say bye to the cicadas," Carolyn says, and Emily bends down so that her face is nearly on the pavement. "Bye bye," Emily says, giggling with both her hands to her mouth as she begins to stand up. "See you in seventeen years."

❖

The last time we watched these videos, I kept track of the timer in the corner of the screen. I repeated these dates to memory, the minutes and seconds they occurred on the footage. It was Thanksgiving 2013, and I sat quietly while Julien complained that we had seen this video a hundred times. I listened while my mom narrated for my father, his head nodding as he said, "Yes, I remember now, the birthday party." When my mother turned to my father and asked him things like, "Rene, do you still have that chair," or "Rene, I still wear that necklace," I took pleasure in listening to them talk in person. I committed these moments to memory, tried to record each word in my head, so that I could replay it later.

When the video ended, my mother went back to her hotel on the other side of town. My father took the stairs one at a time, sleeping in the same clothes he had worn all week. Julien went to his bedroom, the one that has none of his childhood things. I sat in my father's basement and rewound the camera, cradling it the same way I had seen my mother do it so many times. The wheels turned and I could feel myself moving through time, past leaving for Georgia, before the divorce, back to the house on Bedford Road. I clicked play and was filled with the sound of my mother's voice. "You'll be 21 when they come back," she said. I looked at myself, in my plaid dress, holding the cicadas in my hands, fearless as the climb across my cheek. How could I have known what would happen in those seventeen years? Staring at the camera, I only smile, unaware of what the passage of time could bring. "Wave goodbye," she said, and I was tempted to pause and rewind, to keep recapturing this moment in time. Sometimes it feels like life is just a series of goodbyes, goodbye to the moment before, the one that can never be brought back, not by film or by memory. "See you in seventeen years," my four-year-old self said, and I was waving, my hand reaching out to the screen as the tape ended and I was flooded in a blue light.

❖

I wish I could be a voyager in my own life sometimes. The moments that I most want to see aren't recorded. They can be heard from a staircase briefly, or recalled by my mother after the fact. The moment I wish I could watch over and over again came during Thanksgiving this year, as I sat on the stairs, listening to my parents talk in the evening sunset:

Rene offers Carolyn a glass of wine, but she has to drive back to her hotel soon. In the morning, she will return to prepare the turkey for Thanksgiving, but tonight she is sitting in Rene's sunroom, taking in the paintings she hasn't seen in years. They remind her of the sunroom in their old house, the one where they used to set up the Christmas tree. She can still recall the smell of the wicker furniture fusing with pine needles.

Rene doesn't hear her response. These days, the world sounds like it is underwater, sharp and clear at times and the muggy and distant at others. He pours her a glass of wine and slices some cheese, ignoring the expiration label. This country has always been too wary, untrusting of food and people. He arranges the cheeses on a plate, the blue one with the gold rim that he bought after the divorce. Each of his three divorces has brought news dish sets.

Carolyn accepts the wine, taking it from Rene before his shaking hands can spill it on her jeans. She has already ruined a pair this week. Menopause has sliced her open and left her exposed. She feels like a dog in heat, fearing that she is leaving a trail of her dwindling womanhood in her wake. Seeing Rene only reminds her of how fast time has slipped

through her fingers. She can hardly reconcile the man in the home videos with the one before her, shuffling his feet into the chair next to hers.

"Thank you so much for coming," Rene begins, his hands in his lap. He takes off his glasses, and Carolyn is just a fuzzy apparition next to him. When she says, "I'm glad we can do these things together, for the kids," she sounds just like she did in the videos. He considers the videos she has made him watch all week. Emily as a baby, Julien as a sensitive boy hiding behind Carolyn's skirt. These were moments he remembered. But the ballet recitals, the hours of footage around the house, his back to Carolyn as she asked him how his day was – these were more than moments that he did not recall. They were completely new, like footage from someone else's life. It felt as if he had stumbled in upon a mirror image of himself, a man that did not value family the way he knew he did, the way he told his daughter he did every time he spoke to her on the phone. Who had that man been? He did not know him.

"I just want you to know, I'm sorry." Rene says. "I'm sorry I never listened to you. I'm sorry that I didn't take you on a real honeymoon when we got married. I'm sorry that I wasn't there."

Carolyn knows she should look at Rene as he says these things, but her eyes are on the map above Rene's desk. It is one thing to see her life in home videos. She still remembers the way the house looked in the afternoon sun, how it smelled in the summer heat, her own sweat permeating with the bleeding heart rose bush in the yard. But seeing the map from Rene's old office, and sitting in the wicker chairs that used to be in her own home, she feels like she is visiting a museum of artifacts from a life she thought she'd

forgotten. Time passes so quickly, and at her age she has learned to accept that people don't change.

"Why are you saying this now?" she asks. She is no stranger to Rene's apologies. He came to her so many times when they were together, a Godiva box of chocolates in one hand and an apology in the other. Even when they got divorced, and she tried to take his furniture to his new apartment, he locked her out and left her alone calling his name, her voice echoing like a miner in a cave. But later he called with an apology, late at night after the kids had gone to bed, telling her he couldn't let her go yet. She has become wary of his apologies, because they always come with a proposition, like the bait and switch booths in the mall.

Rene thinks about his younger self, the man who had his name on a plaque in the Rainbow Room, the man with an office in San Juan and Caracas, who drove a brand-new 1994 green Mercedes. He hasn't made it into the city in months because the last time he went he fell down the subway stairs. His office is a desk in front of his sunroom window; the Mercedes is missing its side mirror. But Carolyn is here, Carolyn who makes pound cake from memory, Carolyn who cries every time she drops Julien off at the airport, Carolyn who comes to Thanksgiving when none of his Internet girlfriends will answer his email messages. "It was the videos," he says. "I wasn't in a lot of them. And the ones I was in…" He shakes his head. He thinks about the tone of his voice, the slamming of doors that knocked all the pictures off the wall. "I wasn't really there. I didn't take you seriously."

Carolyn knows his admission should make her happy. But when she looks at Rene to thank him, she only sees the face of old age, the places missed shaving, the streaks of grey that she herself is starting to acquire. When she says, "I really appreciate that, Rene,"

she wonders what would have happened if this Rene had met her in New York City that first night. This Rene has seen his life slip through his fingers, this Rene has learned to apologize without expected anything in return. What would have happened seventeen years ago if the Rene sitting before her had apologized to his wife? Would Bedford Road still be there, Emily pulling out of the driveway to go back to school, waving goodbye as the cicadas sang in the distance.

❖

The cicadas are back this summer. In the night, I hear them from my bedroom window, open to welcome any stray breeze that might find its way onto my face. The house is always silent, Julien in his room downstairs, my father tucked away in the basement, and myself in the guest room that my father insists is really mine. I lay awake in the night, listening to their singing, and wonder if they are calling out to each other. Maybe they are so loud because they have been lost to each other for seventeen years, and they don't want to waste the short time they have left.

One night, as the sun sets, I stand in my father's office and trace the map with my fingers. It still sits large and grand over his desk, a vast world laid out on aging paper. I look down at my father's desk and examine his belongings. A computer that he is constantly yelling at, a tray of medications for gout and high blood pressure, a photograph of me in my high school graduation gown. His cane rests in the corner. The paintings he brought from far away lands hang on the wall, facing the kitchen. His stack of business cards still read Rene Gutierrez, CEO, Industrial RE. I touch them lightly, not wanting to be accused of tampering with his things. Each day it appears something new has gone missing from his

house, some object misplaced that he swears was left in the correct place. "Taranacke" I often hear him muttering under his breath, his hand on his hip, the other on the table for balance.

I put my finger to the map and find New Jersey. "Home," I say. I find Georgia, put my other finger to it. "Home." My father puts pins on this map, of all the places he has traveled to. Georgia is smooth to the touch, and I spread my palm wide, covering the distance, bridging the gap so that these places are connected. "Home," I say again, wondering if such a place only exists in memories.

Later, as the streetlights begin to flicker and the trains stop running, I sit on the front porch. Upstairs, my bag is already packed, my bus ticket on the desk by my bed. But for tonight, I only listen to cicadas, calling out to them, my voice echoing into the thunder of their endless voices, "Hello, hello."