ABSTRACT

WHAT YOU DON’T KNOW

by Kärsin K. Painter

This work confronts the wackiness of what it means to be human and to be a member of an American family while resisting an urge toward sentimentality. It explores our complicated natures by examining the way people relate to one another in those moments when their relationships are falling apart or barely being held together. Humor is used to bring attention to our strange, contrary natures and our often ridiculous behavior without moral judgment, allowing the reader to laugh both at and with the characters. The title of the collection is intended to echo the subject of every story: the consequences of what characters don’t know.
What You Don’t Know

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of the Arts

Department of English

by

Kärstin K. Painter

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2007

Advisor

______________________________
Brian Roley

Reader

______________________________
Margaret Luongo

Reader

______________________________
Susan Morgan
CONTENTS

The Photograph 1
Epona 6
Jenny Was Here 12
Experiment 19
Maunalua Bay 27
Arkansas 33
F Word 42
The Taking 48
Necessary Instruments 52
Hair of the Dog 59
THE PHOTOGRAPH

1968

Viola’s husband did not want to have children. He told her this many times over dinner before they were married. But he also whispered into the hollow space between her shoulder blades while they were making love that he would give her everything she ever wanted. Many men reacted that way to Viola, whispered to her simply because they found her heavy sculptures and her callused artist’s fingertips powerful. Viola wanted only to grow her hair out as long as possible before it turned gray and she was forced to cut it to maintain respect in her profession.

He proposed in a rather odd way. They were sitting at a pizza parlor and he mentioned that his parents would be shocked if he told them he was getting married. She laughed and agreed that her parents, too, would be horrified by news of their only daughter getting married so suddenly. They had known each other for two months.

“Do you think they would take it well?” he asked, holding a napkin in one hand and a dripping slice of pizza folded lengthwise in the other.

“I’m sure they would be polite about the whole thing.” She smiled.

“Are you willing to put money on that?”

And since Viola could never resist a dare, she placed a five-dollar bill on the table and called her parents from the restaurant’s pay phone to tell them that she had just become engaged.

On their wedding night, Viola’s hair was a slick sheet of black. She wore green eye shadow and carried two white calla lilies. Instead of wearing lipstick, she bit her bottom lip repeatedly. It pinked up, looking amazingly natural. Her husband’s pants had been improperly hemmed and, for the duration of the ceremony, she stared at his Easter socks in disbelief, little bunnies hugging giant pastel eggs. Later, when they had left the chapel and arrived at the hotel with a special weekend rate, she asked him to leave the socks on.

1973

Viola stood naked in front of their bedroom mirror and thought about children. She calculated the ways in which a child would change their lives. She held her arms low and cradled
an imaginary belly, wide and heavy, emerging from her thin frame. Viola arched her back a little and watched the way her spine eased forward, aching to accommodate that weight. When she heard her husband turning in the bed sheets, she dropped her arms and bent to pick up her dress from a chair.

She ran her toothbrush beneath the bathroom faucet and swiped a perfect stripe of paste onto the bristles. They would have to watch completely different television shows. PBS, maybe. She would replace the Rothko print in their kitchen with one of those message boards that has white space and push-pins for piano teachers’ phone numbers. She heard the sound of car keys and dull coins as he transferred the insides of yesterday’s pockets to today’s pants. He walked into the bathroom and grinned at her foaming mouth of Colgate.

“You’re supposed to brush in tiny circles,” he said. The ends of his leather belt dangled like the mocking buckles of a thrown saddle while he stood, eyes shut, peeing into the toilet recklessly, stretching both arms above his head, his laced fingers cracking with morning. She leaned over the sink and spit.

“I was at the vigorous brushing stage.” She noticed a little urine hit the floor. “And will you please watch what you’re doing?” He would definitely have to start peeing with the bathroom door closed. Door closed and eyes open. She rapped her rinsed toothbrush against the sink and pushed one of her pink pills through the foil of its calendar-like packaging. She swallowed it without water. It went down dry as she felt.

At the doctor’s office, Viola sat on a tall metal table with a thick foam padding wrapped in fake leather. She felt like chicken set on the counter to thaw. Butcher paper laid over the top of the table stuck to the backs of her nervous thighs. The paper adhered to her skin but she was too self-conscious to move for fear it would tear before the doctor returned. Viola sat upright and perfectly still, twisting her wedding ring round and round. She stared at the rack of pamphlets and read their titles, feeling guilty and indulgent. Beyond Genital Herpes; Your Cervix, Your Life; The Truth about Skin Cancer; Diabetes and You; Love Your Heart; Coping with Depression; Living with Hepatitis; STDs: Get Tested. She saw large canisters of swabs and
cotton balls, a red plastic sharps container screwed to the wall, a hotel painting in an expensive frame, and thought about how to negotiate the paper stuck to her thighs.

When the doctor knocked on the door, Viola said, “Come in,” as though the examination room had suddenly become her own apartment.

“V-eye-ola, let’s do this.” The doctor tossed his clipboard onto the small counter with the cotton balls. His hair was combed back and he wore a dark green sweater instead of a white lab coat.

“Geniuses are drawn to green,” she said. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow so she clarified, “This study, it found that people with incredibly high I.Q.s tend to drive green cars. It’s true of cars, maybe sweaters, too.”

“I’d like to think so,” the doctor laughed, “shall we?”

Viola stood from the table and the paper stuck to her thighs ripped loudly. Thankfully, it didn’t come clean off and instead remained pathetically crumpled, barely connected to the rest of the strip. She smiled, embarrassed, and held both arms out at her sides. The doctor pulled the cotton strings on her brightly colored smock and all of Viola, save her blue cotton underwear, was exposed.

“You can put your arms down,” the doctor said quickly, uncapping a fat black permanent marker. Rolling around on a leather stool with casters and leaning forward with something like interest, staring alternately between several of her x-rays and her live flesh, the doctor began to draw across her left breast. A thick line indicated where the breast would be removed. Dotted lines noted what might be saved for reconstruction. Black circled her pale nipple like a target. Viola imagined aggressive sparks flying across the drawn stripes on her skin, herself a flaming Vitruvian Man. There is a solution to cancer: cut off the offending part. And take the uterus, too, just in case.

1979

Viola put the falsie she wore into the empty left cup of her bra. How many times had her husband’s fingers traced the wide, flat scar where her breast used to be? The night she came
home from the hospital, he unbuttoned her shirt down to her waist and shushed her while he kissed the black thread in her skin, then the wet tears falling hard on her collarbones. His quiet tenderness was uncomfortable to her, powerful and alien, and he did not know Viola cried at the momentary shift between them and not her breast.

Sometime into their ninth year of marriage, Viola poured impressively expensive wine into dinner guests’ glasses, her sharp wrists negotiating the bottle’s cool weight absently, as if its neck was the handle of one of her mallets or the grip of a glinting saw, its cord still recklessly strewn across the backyard. She smiled wide for one of her husband’s coworkers in a stiff tie and nodded politely at his banter. His blonde wife spoke of latest fall lines and asked repeatedly about Viola’s dress, not wanting to believe her crime of having purchased it second hand.

When the wife asked directly about the cancer, prodding impolitely with her “Oh, you poor, sweet thing,” Viola set the bottle of wine on a nearby table and, with unabashed willingness, removed her fake breast—a party trick. Across the room, her husband’s eyes carried on about her inappropriately wild hair, her inability to brush teeth in circles, the success of her sculptures—shows on both coasts. Flashes of his own failures glimmering in his half-open mouth and her face gleaming with the prank, Viola thought of her husband’s utter refusal to pee directly into the toilet bowl.

Viola’s husband invited her to a restaurant where they might have a pleasant lunch, exchange remnants, and sign divorce papers. A small girl with wild hair and a wailing voice like a dentist’s drill argued with her mother at a nearby table. While waiting for her husband, Viola’s raw fingers traced the void of her taut stomach, that lost possibility, and she wondered what it was like to be ripened, to feed something and multiply, like her steel sculptures but alive and breathing. The screaming child threw her plate onto the concrete patio and the dinnerware sang in a glory of shattered porcelain. It thrilled her! Viola’s welded metals paled momentarily and then were once again—sharp, brilliant, and shining—enough.

Viola had no difficulty signing the papers. She smiled thinly at her husband, knowing he felt utterly awful for his indiscretion, knowing he realized the cost of his decision. He reached
across the table and said, “Do you remember the night before the surgery? The way you wept into your pillow?”

Viola laughed wildly at her husband’s outburst. He was always trying to say something melodramatic that refused to translate. What she remembered was, after crying at his easy compassion, handing him a camera loaded with film and saying firmly into his confused face, his clear, uncomplicated emotion, *So I’ll remember*. She had wanted evidence of a kind she knew was held only in the eyes.

“I believe you cried for the coming death of us and, you know, Viola, you’re beautiful. You’re much more than I ever deserved.” Her husband leaned forward and touched her hand across the linen-covered table. “Perhaps you shouldn’t sign,” he whispered.

The way she scribbled her signature, the businesslike flourish at the end so unlike her, surprised Viola. Her husband, gathering up the papers, ashamed and guilty, handed her a photograph she had given him years earlier for safekeeping. She ordered a gin and tonic once he had run off. She could hardly contain her joy at the stubborn child with the broken plate who was willing to obliterate her dinner, so confident there would be another full plate tomorrow. Viola looked down at the image of herself, her very own Canon of Proportions, her excellences and her faults enduring.

Those were, unmistakably, her husband’s knees on either side of the photograph. He was sitting, leaning as far back as the chair allowed so he could get all of her in the frame, so consumed with her nakedness that he didn’t even notice his knees in the viewfinder. And there, a 1970s yellow-checked blanket falling past her bare shoulders into full puddles over her bent arms, her head tilted back to show the line of her delicate jaw, one naked thigh parting the curtain of blanket and one perfectly curved breast revealing itself next to the marred space where her left breast had been, entirely mapped in thick black stitches, the skin pulsating purple and injured but god *damn* it still alive, was a radiant Viola.
My father owned a chiropractic business in Swissvale, Pennsylvania, and often traded his secret back-cracking maneuvers for things my mother wanted and couldn’t otherwise afford, like Henckel knife sets and large hams. My mother ordered overstuffed wing-backed chairs with dark wooden feet from Larson’s Furniture (a year of free alignments for Mr. Larson’s son, who played football). The chairs were delivered by men with hands spread wide as the seats of Buicks. They would juggle the chairs in an awkward sort of dance while my mother directed them to place the chairs here, then there, and here again. She believed then in the value of a well-decorated room, in the permanence of good furniture.

“You do not have a horse in the garage!” Christopher squealed, letting his spoon clink against his bowl of breakfast cereal. The spoon slipped off the edge of the bowl and drowned in milk and frosted bits of cartoon shapes. His feet dangled from the chair, pumping wildly with excitement. I could feel his slippers hitting the leg of the table. Thump. “You don’t, Dad.” Thump. “No way.”

“I most certainly do,” my father said calmly. He pulled the business section of the newspaper, folded it in half, and placed it in his work bag. “I’ve kept that horse for years. Mark rides the horse after you’re in bed. Don’t you, Mark?” My father looked at me but didn’t smile. The unbelievable is easier to sell if you aren’t smiling.

“Sure. The borough is beautiful at night, especially on horseback.” I shrugged.

“What’s a borough?”

“A borough is where we live. You’re either a borough or a township. There are no cities in Pennsylvania,” my father said over his coffee.

“I’m no dummy. There’s no horse in our garage.” Christopher fished his spoon out of the bottom of his bowl and held it in his small fist, milk dripping from his fingers. “Where’s Michael?” he asked.

“What’s up, sissy baby?” Michael walked into the kitchen with his floppy hair and his easy gait. He scrubbed the top of Christopher’s head vigorously, teasingly and reached for an
orange on his way out the door, twirling his car keys around one finger.

“Don’t call me baby.” Christopher’s eyes followed Michael out the door.

Michael had just turned seventeen and spent most of his time doing things like growing out his hair, learning to roll joints, and deciding which girl to take to important concerts. He did landscape work for two summers and bought a ’76 Spitfire. The bottom was rusted out but it was a convertible. On the highway, you could hear the asphalt stampede beneath you. He was always in that car, always somewhere else.

———

At dinner that evening, Christopher brought up the horse again.

“Dad?”

“Yes?” My father cut his food properly, like a gentleman, while the rest of us shoveled in at a disturbing rate of consumption.

“What’s the horse’s name? It has a name, right?” Christopher openly chewed between questions.

My father looked confused.


“Ah. Some good old-fashioned Celtic mythology, Mark!” My father laughed and continued, to Christopher, “Epona is the goddess of horses.”

“And the life cycle,” I added with a mouth full of casserole.

“And the cycle of life.”

“But not of table manners, I see,” my mother said disgustedly.

“Like The Lion King?” Christopher asked.

“No.” Everyone at once.

“Look. See food. Seeeee food. Can I ride it?” Christopher opened his mouth, full of half-chewed food, pleased with himself.

“Some decency!” my mother begged, looking sternly at Christopher’s grin.

“Not until you’re at least twelve.” My father shook his head.

“Where’s Michael?” I asked.

Michael came in through our bedroom window, giddy. His eyes were large and unfocused. He told me to stop smiling, my teeth were bright, garish, and making it difficult for him to find his way to bed.

“Mark. Stop smiling. Those teeth, man. Those teeth are so reflective.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll stop,” I said, but I hadn’t been smiling in the first place.

“Look. Look. Hickeys. Four of ’em.” Michael pulled the neck of his t-shirt to expose his skin. He pointed to the dark purple blotches. They glowed in the light of our lamp on the night stand.

“What’s it like?” I asked him, unsure of what I meant exactly. I meant a little about girls and hickeys and a little about the drugs I knew he was taking. I also meant a little about what it was like to be the one we asked after.

“It’s like sucking helium, only bluer. Mark, man, your teeth.”

“Sorry. Where were you?” I asked, covering my mouth.

“I love you, man, but those teeth have to go. They’re like headstones.”

“Sorry.”

“If I were you, I’d pull them out. Want me to help you?” He pulled the covers over his head and laughed maniacally, like no one had worried.

After dinner the following evening, my mother set a small plastic baggie before my father
at the kitchen table. It was filled with bread crusts and just-browning apple slices. There was a note taped to the bag. In Christopher’s handwriting: For Epona.

“Christopher saved this from his lunch,” my mother said. “I assured him Epona would eat every last bit.”

It became a game. My mother encouraged Christopher to select things from his lunches that would not save well and my father was presented with the plastic baggie every evening after dinner. He made a big production of taking the food behind the garage for his horse. Christopher never noticed the toed-up earth in a line down the side of the yard, little graveyards of table scraps.

———

Late into the summer, I sat up in bed at the confident sound of a stranger’s voice at our door. Our parents voices were muffled through the floor, reasonable, apologetic. From the window, I could see a police car pulling away from the house.

“The police? That’s what it’s come to? The cops?”

I pictured my father shaking his head slowly, more disappointed than angry. My mother would be clasping and unclasping her hands.

“It’s nothing. We were just fooling around.” Michael’s voice was quickly dismissive.

“Destruction of commercial property is not just fooling around.”

“Such a pair of fucking stiffs!” Michael scoffed. I imagined his fist, rapid-fire into his open hand: fuck-ing-stiffs. Pat-pat-pat.

“Listen, son, I won’t have you—” My father’s voice was calm, rational.

“Don’t, then!”

Christopher appeared in my bedroom doorway, the hall light blazing behind his small, dark shadow. He was still young enough to wear pajamas sets.

“Mark, can I sleep with you? They’re yelling,” he said nervously.

Downstairs, the front door heaved open and sucked itself shut. I moved to the other edge of the bed and opened the covers for him. He crawled in and we stared up at the glow-in-the-dark star stickers on the ceiling. We weren’t like that for long before Michael was at the window, sliding it open and sticking his head into the room.

“Hey you two, come on,” he whispered.

“Why?” I didn’t sit up, just rolled my head to the side to look at him over
Christopher.

“Come on.” Michael gestured toward his car with his thumb and a nod. His face in the dark was earnest, the fight minutes before, stupid.

“You were yelling,” Christopher chastised.

“Do you want to see Epona or do you want to be a moronic baby?”

I pushed Christopher through the window and let him sit on my lap in the Spitfire. Michael drove too fast down black roads that seemed to be nothing more than a flickering yellow line. The drive was long and Christopher fell asleep even with the car radio turned on and the wind batting at our ears. Sweaty with the sleep of youth, his forehead rested against my shoulder until the sound of a gravel drive awoke him.

One eye on the road, Michael lifted his finger and pointed. Christopher’s face froze with disbelief and he squeezed my arm. Where had Michael found it? Beyond a length of fence: a black horse.

———

We spent the rest of the summer telling stories of the things we’d done while out with Epona. She jumped two fences, thirteen feet high, so I could rescue a drowning woman. She ran faster than six police cars and helped Michael to detain crooked politicians (all specifically Republican, much to my father’s chagrin). She was so fast that my hair nearly lost all of its color. She was more beautiful than Black Beauty, and blacker. She was almost invisible in the dark. My father taught her to do tricks and she shook hands with strangers using her hoof. She won the blue ribbon in the neighborhood horse contest. Famous people called the house while Christopher was at school, asking our mother to sell Epona. She wouldn’t, not even for ten million dollars.

And so, Christopher was the only person who was not anxious when our phone rang in the middle of dinner some time later.

“I’ll get it. It’s probably Harrison Ford wanting to buy Epona. That man just won’t give up.” Our mother set her silverware down and walked to the phone hanging on the kitchen wall, still holding a cloth napkin in her hand. “Hello?” I heard her in the background. “Yes, I’m his mother.”

I remember how pink her skin looked against the wallpaper, then how white. How suddenly white.
“Who is Harrison Ford?” Christopher asked. Then, “Where is Michael?”

Women from church brought lots of things wrapped in foil. I tried not to get chocolate cake all over my suit. People took turns steering my mother around the room, seating her in different chairs—rearranging furniture that seemed to no longer have feet. She began asking for Christopher. The women told her he was there, they would be right back with him.

“Where is he?” she started loudly. I sat down and she absently put her hand in my hair. Her eyes were like Michael’s—eerily still and so wide that you could see our living room furniture in them. I covered my teeth, just in case. “Where is Christopher?” she asked, not really of me but over me.

“Dad’s going to look for him. He’ll be right back. Do you want some cake?”

“Go with your father. Right now, go on, hurry up.” She was panicky.

We found him standing on a folding chair outside of the garage, trying to see through the small square windows. My father scooped him up easily, quickly, as if he had never dropped a thing in his life. He headed toward the house, Christopher’s clip-on tie flung backward over his shoulder, bouncing with the steps.

“You haven’t fed her for days!” Christopher screamed, squirming wildly. My father stopped. He put Christopher on the lawn abruptly and kneeled down, facing him. Christopher stared back at our father. “You haven’t fed Epona! I’ve been saving food and you haven’t come to the garage at all!” He pointed his finger. Angry.

Our father stared back firmly.

“Are there cities or boroughs in heaven?” Christopher asked. My father didn’t answer.

Christopher sucked in air like it was knifing him and choked on his own slobber. Snot ran down his upper lip. My father put both of his hands on Christopher’s shoulders, looked him straight in the eye, and said nothing.

“But what if I never get to twelve?”
Jenny was here

Jenny has spiky blue hair, tiny sharp bangs that run jagged across her forehead, and a ring of white-blond growing out at the crown. She is leaning up against the stucco wall of the downtown Taco Bell, where I’m working forty plus and on my break. The sleeves of her lilac cardigan are pushed up past her sharp elbows, the layers of t-shirts beneath arranging themselves casually across her collar bones. I like to see her exposed wrist, the blue veins beneath her pale skin, like to watch the way her palm falls back when she cups the foil square sprinkled with cocaine and baking soda. She pours a tiny bit of bottled water into the powder, smears it around with her middle finger. When she licks her finger her face screws up a bit from the bitterness. Her silver rings flash like salmon underwater. Jenny talks about growing up Mormon while we wait for the mixture to cake up so we can smoke it. That’s what we do, the two of us: Jenny tells stories and I listen for what she’s really saying.

“And absolutely no coffee. Really, even caffeinated tea is a no-no,” she says, still cupping the foil in one hand. She pushes a strand of iridescent hair out of her eyes. “There’s a thing about hot beverages or something. I don’t really know. I missed seminary.”

“Seminary? Like for priests?” I ask, touching her hand when I check the cocaine. Almost imperceptibly, she pulls away from me.

“Sort of like catechism or whatever.” Jenny shrugs and the odd angles of her hair stiffly refuse to move with her. She holds the foil close to her chest and looks down, her other hand ransacking her sweater pocket for a lighter. She looks around the parking lot for drive-thru customers, then hands the foil to me. I hold it by the edges, pinching the thin crinkling sheet between my cold fingertips. Jenny finds the lighter and flicks it with her thumb, moving the flame in circles on the underside of the foil, hovering above it with the shell of a Bic pen. She holds her face over the smoke and breathes deeply. The smoke rises from the foil, drifting lazily before being violently sucked into Jenny’s lungs. Her eyes are unshuttered windows when she makes the pass to me. The sun glints off of her bangs and the foil like mirrored rainbow puddles of car oil.

“All you need to know, Sam, is that church is three hours long,” she says, resting her head against the cold stucco and pulling in the edges of her unbuttoned cardigan, wrapping them around her slender middle. “Three hours. I feel really good right now. Maybe pancakes in a little while.”
“Yeah, pancakes sound perfect . . . but later. After work, maybe.” I nod. Jenny spends a lot of time talking about what we’ll eat in the future because we’re never hungry in the present.

She laughs, giddy, clutching her collar and pulling it to her chin. “You know what would be totally great right now?” She stands up from the pavement and zaps her ringed fingers at my chest like voodoo, making frantic little figure-eights. Beneath her loose sweater, layers of t-shirts seem to go in different directions across her breasts. I wad the blackened foil into a small ball and drop it onto the street, kick it a short distance from us.

“What?” I ask.

“Guess,” she says, clapping her hands together. It makes me a little nervous, the way she’s always asking me to guess like this. We both sort of know there is a wrong answer.

“Banning the color orange? It doesn’t look good on anyone. The fashion industry should just stop already. We should ticket people and everything,” I say, shoving my hands into my pockets and scraping the toe of my boot on the street. A little bit of burrito sauce.

“Yes. Yes.” She says the second yes directly into my face, grabbing the lapels of my coat with her tiny fists. She presses her mouth hard against mine. Jenny’s kisses are all teeth and tongue, really hungry. She lets go of me abruptly and says, “But! A roller coaster. My stomach is already doing flips and if we were on a roller coaster, it could be doing flips squared, Sam. I’ll bet no one has ever experienced that.”

Before she heads back to our place, Jenny bends down and tugs on her thick knee socks, one at a time, smoothing the lumpy green wool over her thin calves. It does something to me—little jolts of static—the way she holds her foot out, pressing her heel against the footbed of her heavy brown shoe, balancing awkwardly on the other foot. It’s so close to accident it’s graceful.

Our first two months in Denver, we stayed at the Hotel Newhouse above Capitol Hill Books—a fleabag of a joint—where we could rent a furnished room for $130 a week and Jenny could spend all day in the bookstore. I got the job slinging tacos and now we’re in a studio on 13th and Clarkson, where we can see Union Station from the roof. The pedestrian bridge looms over the train yard toward the city, the lilting mast of a ship homesick for land.
Jenny likes to watch the trains line up along its belly, their empty cars waiting patiently to be filled.

“Those trains are the only hopeful thing anymore,” Jenny says to me, lifting her chin in the direction of the bridge. She has a second-hand flannel blanket around her like a cape; the diffuse glow of the city at night blurs the line of blond-blue in her hair. She winds her hair around her ring finger, strands of it against her jewelry. “When I was little, my father used to give me blessings.” She looks out at the bridge, shivers beneath the blanket.

Jenny hasn’t spoken to her father for a couple of years. They’d assumed it was only drugs. When she started handing out her Bibles at the mall, telling people God was speaking through her (hellfire-snake-handling kind of shit), it had been his idea to have her institutionalized. Sometimes I come home from work and catch her on the phone, talking low, secretive. I’m pretty sure it’s her mother, asking about Jenny’s medication, her diet. I never ask and Jenny always hangs up the phone casually, microwaving her tea like we have friends who call.

“I remember asking about the priesthood. It meant God talked to you. And girls couldn’t have it. You do the math on that one,” she says, laughing in a way that separates us. I pull in close behind her, kiss her ear full of metal studs absentmindedly, grateful for the way she leans back into my chest. She lights a cigarette and smokes it, silent for awhile, with her back against me and her hand careful not to burn the blanket.

“The Mormon priesthood is a little different because most everyone is considered a priest. They don’t say it like that. They say has the priesthood not is a priest. Is it like that for Catholics?” Jenny finally says. She keeps on before I can answer. “Anyway, I had the measles. The measles, can you believe that, and I was sure I was dying the light through my bedroom window was so bad. I couldn’t get deep enough under the covers. I just burrowed under the blankets and cried, screamed, for it to stop. My father came home from work and found us, my mother holding my arms across my chest to keep me from clawing out my own eyes.”

“Jesus,” I whisper. We’re swaying just slightly, a kind of dance where she’s right up next to me and still long gone. Jenny talks about being Mormon with a sad fondness, like she can’t get back to some original happiness. Like she’s lonely for what she doesn’t know.
“Yeah, that feeling of burning. I wanted to be blind, you know, just for the relief,” she says, flicking the butt of her cigarette over the edge of the building. The traffic on the streets below is a steady gleam of red tail lights in the dark, wheels monotonously grinding sand into pavement.

“So my father gets his consecrated oil which is, you know, blessed, though I’m not sure if it has to be blessed in the temple or if it can just be regularly blessed or whatever. Anyway, he gets his oil and my eyes are burning and I’m begging for blindness and he says this prayer, this blessing, and the strangest thing, Sam, I could feel his hands trembling. He rubbed some of the oil onto my forehead and above both of my ears, a little onto the top of my head, in my hair, and I could totally feel his hands trembling. Like something big was happening, something powerful that was going to change me.”

“What happened?” I ask, resting my chin on the top of her head, touching behind her ear with my fingertip, where I imagine her father placed the oil.

“I was crying and he was praying and, I remember this specifically, I thought my father was afraid to ask God for a favor,” she said.

“Did it work?”

Turning toward me, Jenny drapes her arms around my neck, the blanket like wings, enveloping me. She cocks her head to the side. “What am I thinking about right now, right this second?” she asks.

“Jenny.”

“Come on, Sam. What am I thinking?” She looks directly at me, smiling, waiting for me to say the thing. The thing that will make her feel better.

“You’re thinking that vegetarians are lying to themselves? That tofu tastes like cardboard. You’re thinking: how weird is it that they keep wanting tofu to taste like meat.”

“Oh, yes,” she exclaims, grabbing my hand and kissing my palm. “That’s it exactly.”

“So, did it work?” I ask and she looks confused for a minute, holding my hand against her face, then remembers.

“Oh! No, but it’s lovely to think so, isn’t it?”

I’d first seen her standing on a large plastic planter in the middle of the mall, outside of The Footlocker where I was working. Her hair was orange and red then, ignored into long
dreadlocks. She wore shorts and high boots, a black tank top that assumed you were a regular idiot if you didn’t at least try to catch a look. She flailed around, her compact biceps pumping as she threw her arms out, shouting a new religion at customers giving her a wide berth. She passed out booklets she’d sewn together, snippets of the King James’ Bible glued to construction paper alongside poems scribbled in wax crayon and nude Polaroids of herself.

I was down two strikes for possession of a controlled substance, holding down the crap shoe job at The Footlocker, listening to fat middle-management describe the specific locations of bone spurs, and I had never seen anything so wickedly gorgeous.

“You selling shit?” I asked, bending my head back to make eye contact and using my foot to rifle through the booklets she’d scattered on the dingy tiled floor.

“I’m not selling anything. I’m a vessel, you know, for God,” she said.

“Are these your boobs?” I asked, pointing to one of the booklets.

“Yeah, of course. A vessel. A body.” She jumped down from the planter and put her hands on her hips.

“A vessel for God is handing out pornography in a shopping mall?”

“It’s a new language. Image, art, commandment,” she explained.

I nodded. I had no clue but wanted to say the right thing.

“So like body, poetry, gospel. I get it.”

“Yeah, you do. You totally do.” She’d been committed shortly after that.

When I first bought our tickets out of Boise, Jenny was three months out of the hospital and living with friends in a ratty apartment. Her father had sworn her off but her mother brought her canned pears while he was at work.

“The Mile High city,” Jenny said. “Hey, hey.” She had turned from me then, setting the tickets on the kitchen counter and pulling her shirt over her head, showing me her glowing bare back, the royal angles of her shoulder blades. She made love to me like electrocution: dangerous and beautiful but mean. She might have been off the lithium at that point, I think.

Our love is above all paperwork, but we’re still going to get a beagle and live the normal life. The normal life amped, anyway. I’ll bring in the cash, of which there is not a lot, and Jenny will buy things like mismatched dishes and old books that she reads aloud while
we get high, lying around on my day off. Just books and coke and Jenny in her knee socks on our air mattress on the floor. That’s what Denver can do for us, Jenny and me; give us enough sun to set down an eye hook into concrete for a dog’s leash, some space to exorcise what’s behind us, the guts to say out loud: Not believing in anything is a solitary position.

When Jenny breaks all of the dishes in our place, I know I’ll find her on the roof, smoking cigarettes, waiting for me with the cocaine. And there she is, her glimmering hair pulled back into a short haphazard ponytail, barely held in place by the elastic, smoking a cigarette, her arms folded across her chest, her bright red knee socks sagging into her boots. Jenny’s not a crier; she won’t cry. I stand at a distance behind her, wondering if she has heard the door to the roof slam behind me. We stand like this, apart and together, until my fingers feel numb. I pick at the edges of the watchband on my wrist while she smokes.

Jenny’s voice is sharp in the night—a guitar string about to break. “The Mormons, we do all of this genealogy, okay? Lists of people, all people. Or, the goal is all people. But they’re just these lists of names.”

“The dishes,” I say, stepping toward her, touching her shoulder. She flinches, surprised.

“I was tired of them. These lists, they’re real people. Or were real people. Since you can’t get into heaven without accepting God, you know, as a Latter Day Saint, they keep these lists and then they baptize them.”

“The lists?” Silence.

“No, the dead people. I’ve done it. I wore a white gown and waded into a giant marble pool, a baptismal fount or whatever, with all these oxen carved out of the marble. Then this guy prayed over me. He read these names off of a computer screen facing us and after every name, he dunked me under the water. Name, under. Name, under. But I was just this, this stand in person for the real person and the real person was the dead one.” Now she laughs, her head thrown back.

“All of those lists and I’m not even on them anymore. They cut me out over the booklet stunt. Well, for that and the nude photos all over the church pews. Just, you know, a Jenny Was Here kind of thing.”

“You know what I’m thinking?” I interrupt.
She readjusts her arms, touches the back of her neck, her fingers skipping momentarily along her hairline, her spine stiffening. “It’s unbelievable, really. I mean, excommunication? Kind of severe, right?”

“Guess,” I insist.

“That I’m crazy,” she says. She tugs on her ear, the studs twinkling next to her radiant skin. She scratches her calf with the toe of her boot and one knee sock falls further down her leg. “That you never should have brought me here. That I broke all of our dishes. You’re worried that this might be the best of it. You can’t trust me with a dog.” Her voice is clear, matter of fact. She pulls the cocaine out of her sweater pocket, taps the tiny paper envelope she’s folded into the shape of a schoolgirl’s note.

“It’s true, you did break the dishes. But I’m thinking of the way you smell after spending all day in the bookstore, like heavy paper and binding glue.”

“Sam,” Jenny says over the quiet sounds of the city. She wants me to guess and I have no idea.

“That television is an evil device used to control the minds of the general population? That eventually all we’ll care about is television and we’ll develop a social program that involves televisions that actually raise children.”

Jenny finally faces me. Lights from the pedestrian bridge illuminate her; create a spark of blue light around her face. She holds each of her elbows in her hands, cradling herself, and steps into my arms but I’ve lost her. She smells like the books, like the lists of people who are nothing but names, ritual.

“No,” she says, her breath warm against my throat, her bright hair smooth against my skin. “No, that’s not it at all.”
**EXPERIMENT**

“It isn’t that I don’t like serving food to people but, *God*, that environment, Clara. It’s not good for me. I can’t give 100 percent,” Noel said to her back. Clara used her spatula like a weapon, vigorously raking vegetables frying in a wok on the stove. Her mother-in-law had given them the wok last year, along with an $800 check to help cover their rent during Noel’s last life cleansing phase.

“At least it is a job,” Clara said, tight-lipped and rigid, her eyes angrily focused on the sizzling peppers she was mixing into stir-fry. He was going to quit another job.

“It’s toxic! You have no idea. Do you know how long that alfredo sauce has been sitting in those vats? *Do* you? The amount of fat just floating on top! It kills! And I’m supposed to serve it to people *and smile.*” Noel pulled his head back and wrinkled his face like he was going to throw up. Clara didn’t have to turn around to see him; she knew he was making that face. It was the same face he’d made when she ordered a cheeseburger during the cleansing phase.

Clara worked as a research assistant in a biology lab at the University of Nebraska. She had been assigned to what she called the fish sticks project—a study of common swordtail fish. Typical of nature’s comedic bent, the male swordtail was the prettier, brighter colored sex. Very small, they had electric blue flashes across their silvery midsections and long, vividly red “swords” the size of toothpicks trailing their tail fins. They were very arrogant fish.

The first stage of the fish project involved a strange plastic contraption—a long, clear tube suspended on a table between two large trashcans filled with water. A small motor had been rigged to the tube, creating a current for the swordtail to swim against. One end of the tube was covered with a mesh screen to keep exhausted fish from being swept into a water-filled trashcan. It was Clara’s job to place a swordtail into the clear tube, turn the current motor to medium, and time how long the fish could swim until, due to exhaustion, it gave way to the current and was flattened against the mesh screen. She sat on a stool for the duration of the swim then recorded the results in a logbook. She repeated the process with the next fish.
Mornings, she took the elevator to the basement laboratory, where rows upon rows of greenish fish tanks glowed eerily beneath the exposed yellow tubes of fluorescent lighting and glistening fish displayed themselves frantically behind glass. There weren’t windows and someone who had worked in the lab long before Clara had taped a faded poster of Jimi Hendrix to one of the painted concrete walls. The upper corner of the poster was torn, leaving a bizarrely manicured part in Jimi’s hair. This amused Clara for reasons she couldn’t explain. Someone had written this one goes out to my fins in a bubble pointing to Jimi’s mouth. Clara did not find this amusing. Biologists had very bad jokes.

“Aren’t you going to ask what I’m doing?” Noel called out as Clara walked past him and set her workbag on the kitchen table.

“What are you doing?” Clara sighed, flipping through the mail and walking back from the kitchen. Zero percent interest. Zero percent down. She looked up from the printed envelopes to find their sofa in the middle of the room and Noel standing on his head with his palms against the carpeting, his legs leaning against the wall for support. His blue sweatpants fell away from his legs, exposing his pale, hairy ankles.

“Jesus,” Clara muttered under her breath, mostly to herself.

“What? What did you say?” Noel asked, his face puffy and red.

“What are you doing?” Clara dropped her arms, still cupping the stack of mail in one hand.

“It’s for my brain. According to Nathaniel Gibson, standing on your head for twenty minutes increases circulation to your brain. The more oxygen your brain cells get, the smarter you become.” Noel’s elbows were shaking. Nathaniel Gibson’s Get Healthy! Lifestyle® program consisted of a vegan diet coupled with biweekly colon flushes and avoiding any product manufactured with dyes numbered two through six. Program fees ranged from $400 to $2200 a month, depending on how healthy a person wanted to become.

“That’s terrible science,” Clara said.

“It’s not science. It’s common sense.”

“Right. It’s the Get Healthy! Lifestyle®,” Clara snickered.

“Sarcasm is a contributing factor in 35 percent of all artery blockages,” Noel said, accusingly chipper. Clara stared at his whitish, rubbery stomach, the ragged mouth of his
upside-down t-shirt grinning at her, and her mouth watered painfully as if she had swallowed something sour. Noel had definitely quit his job.

Tuesdays were the worst. On Tuesdays, Clara had to cut the fish. She sat in front of fish tank seventeen. The metal feet of the stool scraped against the linoleum tiles ominously. She pitched her feet on the footrest of her stool and stared at the fish flashing blue and red in their luminous green rectangles of habitat. She laid a stack of large notecards in the hammock of her skirt. She dunked a neon green net into the tank, trapping a fish against the edge.

“Well, Jimi, what do you think? Is today his lucky day?” Clara asked the Hendrix poster. She held the fish against the tank with one hand and randomly selected a notecard from the stack of percentages in her skirt with the other.

“Damn. Forty percent,” she said aloud. “Sorry buddy,” she said to the fish. It was already upset with the netting. Just wait.

Clara pulled the swordtail out of the water. Its body flopped with intake of too much air. She whacked the net against her palm until the slimy little fish fell into her hand. This was the hard part. Holding the flailing fish in her closed hand, she could feel its cool writhing flicking against her skin. She stood from her stool and grabbed a Petri dish from the table. Opening her hand against the dish, she held the fish in place and grabbed a smaller Petri dish with her other hand which she used to hold the flapping swordtail reasonably still while she measured its sword with a ruler. Clara was sure that other research assistants were capable of doing the math in their heads, but she needed to work out 40 percent of $\frac{3}{4}$ an inch on paper. In order to traumatize the swordtail as little as possible, she placed it back into the net and held him captive underwater so it could breathe while she performed the math.

“Forty percent of $\frac{3}{4}$ an inch, Jimi? You were smoking enough weed to be good at measurements.” Clara marked her ruler. When they were first married, Noel had grown marijuana in the basement of their rental house. Clara liked to drape herself, soft and just bathed, across his chest to watch him roll a joint on their nightstand. He had whispered sleepily into her crown of hair with a mouth full of smoke. The illusory promises of his flashy tail fins.

Finally, Clara pulled the fish from the water and sloppily pinned it using her Petri dish technique. She rubbed a red numbing gel across the fish’s tail and, using an extremely
sharp scalpel, she removed forty percent of its sword. It jerked slightly and she moved it to tank eighteen. It would have one day of rest before having to swim the tube.

“Any bets on the next guy?” Clara said after she’d made the cut. Sometimes the fish would jump badly after being sliced. She couldn’t blame them, even if she had to spend several minutes scrambling on the floor, trying to recapture a jumping fish before it died or a supervisor decided to visit the lab and discover just how much she actually cared about whether the sword helped the fish to swim or attract mates.

Clara always felt particularly bad when she drew the 100 percent card, partly because of having to cut off some poor fish’s entire sword and partly because not having to think about the math made her life easier.

“Won’t you at least try it?” Noel’s voice was mollifying. He held a large cooking spoon in one hand, his other hand waiting patiently to catch scalding drops. He pushed the spoon toward Clara, insisting.

“You know I don’t like tofu,” she said, turning her head from the spoon.

“It’s good for you. Lots of protein and no dead animals.”

“Dead animals. Yum. Besides, that’s not the point.” Clara held her ground while she opened a bottle of wine. The shiny screw twisted idly against the rubber cork in the bottle.

“These rubber corks are so crappy!”

“Wine is so bad for you. Want some carrot-apple juice?” Noel asked, still insisting with the spoon in Clara’s face.

“What I want is a husband who can keep a job,” she snipped.

“The problem isn’t keeping a job, Clara. Nathaniel Gibson says that it is important to work in an environment that is free of toxins and emotional static. The right job just hasn’t found me yet. But it will. Really, it will.” Noel’s voice was falsely confident. His shoulders seemed to fall a bit, the spoon dipped. “Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“What I want is a glass of wine!” Clara threw the corkscrew onto the counter and sat down at the kitchen table. She pushed her palms against her eyes and saw bright flashes of neon streaks swimming against the blackness of her eyelids. Later, she would balance their accounts. When Noel added more wet tofu to the hot pan, all Clara heard was the sound of money—coins being dropped into slot machines.
She stared at the blinking dots of light skating across her closed eyes until Noel brought his dinner to the table. He set a glass of wine in front of her.

“I really shouldn’t be touching that stuff, not even to pour it,” he said quietly.

Clara pressed her hands against her eyes one more time, producing an explosive blast of color, and stood from the chair. She took the wine with her.

“I wish you’d just try it,” Noel told his plate of tofu and vegetables. “You would be surprised by how much a gluten-free lifestyle can really make you feel better.”

Stage two of the fish project involved three fish tanks. Clara placed a female swordtail in the middle tank. The female swordtails were all alike—no flash, very little color. They were serious business, back and forth in their tanks like men in suits delivering important presentations, all facts and pie charts. In the tank on the left, Clara placed a male swordtail that had had its sword removed according to a randomly selected notecard. The tank on the left held a male fish with its full tail. Clara videotaped each female fish for thirty minutes to record its reaction to the different males.

Immediately spotting the female, the male swordtails sashayed along their glass borders, their fins prominently cutting through the glow of green water. It was a neat trick. They created a rippled light show—flash, shadow, color—a small tornado of water and reflection. It didn’t seem like much of an experiment.

“Electric or phone?” Clara asked. Noel was stretched out on his back on the living room floor. His hair was tousled in a way that Clara used to find appealing. He was breathing deeply and his eyes were closed. He brought one arm up from the floor and held up a finger to request that she please hold.

“Noel!” she barked. His legs twitched slightly but he didn’t open his eyes. He took in another two slow, deep breaths and sat up.

“What were you asking?” he said dreamily, calmly.

“Electric or phone? Which one do you want to pay?”

“I’ll call my mother.” Noel stood up and shook out his arms. He bent toward the floor, folding himself in half like a cheap chair.
“We’re not calling your mother, so pick.” Clara gripped a different bill in each hand. She had twisted her hair up and held it in place with a pencil. Noel twisted from side to side, his arms loosely reaching this way, then that way.

“Oh boy, this is not easy,” he stammered.

“You’re telling me?” She felt her nails perforating the papers in her hands.

“This is, shoot, this is really hard but—” He stepped toward her.

“Come off it, Noel. You have to get a fucking job.”

“Yes, well, okay. Clara, sit down.” He put his arm around her shoulder and led her to the sofa. The sofa she had paid for. The sofa she was still making payments on.

“Uhm, you know how Nathaniel Gibson is always talking about how important it is to live your best life, to be the best you? I’ve got to get truly uncluttered and, you know, I finally figured it out.”

“Figured what out?” Her voice was irritated, exasperated, tired.

“Why I keep coming back to the cleansing phase. I can’t get past the cleansing phase. It’s why the right job hasn’t come to me yet. I’ve got to really cleanse. If I want a chance to be the real me, I’ve got to do the hard work, all of it.” Noel was talking faster now.

“Okay, Noel. I give up. Why do you keep coming back to the cleansing phase?” Her voice was defeated.

“It’s you, Clara. It’s you. It’s not me. I haven’t touched meat for eight months. I haven’t put toxins into my body. I haven’t used white napkins because they’re bleached with chemicals that cause cancer. I’ve religiously followed the Get Healthy! Lifestyle® and then it dawned on me. It’s you. You’re toxic.”

“I’m toxic?” Clara couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The bills in her hands fell to the floor and she didn’t hear a thing. Noel’s mouth kept moving and, still, she heard nothing. The sound clicked back on when Noel said “divorce.”

“Wait. You’re divorcing me?”

“It’s not that I don’t love you because I do. But you’re holding me back from my true potential, from my true, healthy self. Nathaniel Gibson says that if—” His hand was on her knee, patting gently. She smacked it away. She stood from the couch and looked at Noel, with his bright blue eyes and his riff of curled dark hair. He was so, so beautiful. Not even
handsome, but lovely. And then, she gave into the urge she’d been having for quite some time: She spat in his face. It was a thrilling, soft sound.

“Nathaniel Gibson is an ass!” she screamed.

“Oh, Clara. This is exactly why I know he’s right. You’re just not open.” Noel shook his head and wiped his cheek with his sleeve.

Today, the fish would swim. For once, Clara was glad that the lab didn’t have windows. The sickly haze of yellow light was exactly what she needed. She ransacked a filing cabinet for a stopwatch and dragged her stool to the swimming contraption. After scooping up the first fish from tank eighteen, she dumped him into the clear tube. He floated dumbly, hardly moved. She turned the current motor to medium. The fish suddenly wriggled in the water, its recently docked tail fin, a rudder navigating the current. Clara clicked the stopwatch and sat down. She opened the logbook to the appropriate page, stared at the swimming swordtail, and glanced at the watch, waiting for the fish to finally give up and allow the current to flatten him against the mesh screen.

Some of the fish were particularly strong. They usually lasted for ten minutes until finally giving up, but at least once every swim day, she’d get a fish that kept at it for forty or more minutes. As far as she could tell, their swimming capabilities had nothing whatsoever to do with the amputated percentage of their swords. The forty-minute fish, that fish was just stubborn.

When she thought about it, really, the entire experiment was stupid. The fish were subjected to surgery by a hack doctor with a scalpel (not even a real biologist but a biologist’s research assistant), then thrown into a current and forced to swim to their breaking points. It made no sense. Clara didn’t need her gallbladder to run marathons, but it didn’t take a genius to know that if they had removed it two days before a race, her performance would be affected. You couldn’t just cleave things from your life—cut out sugar and alcohol or Noel’s fucking toxins—and expect to be 100 percent the same.

Clara stared at the fish struggling in the clear plastic tube. She wasn’t sure but it looked tired. It looked sick of its own scaly movement in the water; sick of the stupid repetition of its existence. She cranked the current motor to high and the fish was instantly pushed into the mesh screen. It didn’t even fight back; it just let the water flow over its gills.
Clara clicked the stopwatch and wrote down the time. She took the fish to tank nineteen. Its relieved swimming in the recovery tank confirmed Clara’s feelings. There was a freedom in its movements, as if the glassy perimeters of its tank stretched for miles. Having done time for science, the fish seemed to know that the remainder of its life would be divorced from green netting.

Clara retrieved another swimmer from tank eighteen. She turned the current to medium and then, against the rules and seriously compromising the integrity of the experiment, she ratcheted the dial to high. The second fish—thwick!—hit the screen. Clara, fuck science, wrote down the results. The third fish—thwick! The sound of their scaly little bodies hitting the screen with such odd force delighted her so much that she started to cry. The fourth fish, the fifth fish, all of the fish in tank number eighteen—thwick! Thwick! Thwick! Thwick! Thwick! It was the same wonderful sound her spit had made when it hit Noel’s cheek.
MAUNALUA BAY

I am fourteen years old and I have stolen a car. My parents’ car, and I am driving it down Ala Ilima Street, toward the high school, where my cousin is waiting in his baseball jersey, looking cool. The only problem is that I cannot drive a stick and every so often, the gears gnash together like my father’s teeth. My palms are sweating but I’m feeling pretty good this way. Loose. I do what I feel like, man.

My cousin sees me and doesn’t wave or anything. He just pulls down the bill of his cap and looks up and down the street, like he’s expecting someone else. I steer toward the sidewalk and the car stalls out. He walks around the front, running his fingertip along the gleaming blue hood, and opens the driver’s door.

“Get out. I’m driving, mahu,” he says. And I do. James gets behind the wheel and turns his hat around, the bill hovering over the back of his neck, the ProGear tag hanging on his forehead like a scrap of a cheap doll’s hair. He turns the radio on and rolls the dial to 105.5, the loud shit. He looks over at me and snickers.

“What?” I ask, turning in my seat to glower at him.

“Nothing. Chill.” He laughs and smacks the back of my head. I rub the spot with my open palm, making small circles in my hair. My cousin can be a real bitch sometimes.

We pick up Evan at the Dairy Queen, where he decorates cakes with his grandma, who owns the place. When we pull into the parking lot, Evan comes out the back, untying his long white apron smeared with brightly colored frosting. He opens the passenger side door and throws his thumb out at me. “Shotgun,” he says.

I climb out of the seat but I’m pissed off about it.

“This is my dad’s car, fuckhead,” I say under my breath.

“You wanna say that louder, so we can all hear, Champ?” Evan grabs my shirt and pushes me up against the car. He laughs, flicks my forehead with his middle finger. He ducks into the car and throws his wadded up apron next to my backpack on the back seat. I have to move it out of the way so I can sit down. It smells like french-fry grease and chocolate frosting.

“You babysitting?” Evan asks James, nodding in my direction.
“It’s cool. You can’t do this shit without his brother.” James leans back into the driver’s seat and drapes his hand loosely over the steering wheel. He pushes different buttons on the console. It is an expensive car. We’re going to drive it out to the bay, see if we can feel Liam. When Evan tries to light a cigarette, James stomps on the gas pedal, then the brake. I lurch forward and have to throw my arm against the front seats. My backpack falls onto the floor with a heavy sound. James is totally cracking up.

“You okole puka,” Evan swears and points to a singed hole in the leather seat.

“Oh, your dad’s gonna be pissed.” James looks over his shoulder at me but I just shrug.

“Don’t mean shit,” I say. My father is too busy making kala—money, eh? I wonder if they notice the warble in my voice. My brother pitched for the Moanalua Menehunes. The muscles in his arms were thick twine roped over bones. He liked to steal our father’s car, this car, and drive out to the cliffs along Maunalua Bay with Evan and James. They were jumping into the water, probably getting some girls stoned, definitely drunk, when he died. Liam cracked his skull on the ocean floor. Fucked up, right?

James parks in the street in front of a large white house. The walkway to the front door is lit up with those tiny grass lights—the ones that look like Japanese lanterns—even though it is the middle of the afternoon. Evan walks straight on into the house, smooth and unworried, and we follow him.

“Your parents home?” James asks as we follow Evan into the kitchen, where he yanks open the reflective door of a stainless steel refrigerator. He hands me a beer. I pull the tab and sip the foam from the metal moat around the can, then drink the entire beer straight away. It goes down real easy, not at all like I thought. Evan offers one to James but he waves it off.

“Must be in the blood.” Evan grins and starts grabbing beers from the shelf on the fridge and dumping them into a navy duffel bag on the floor.

“Evan?” A woman’s voice calls from somewhere in the house. “Is that you?”

Evan doesn’t stop shuffling the beers into the duffel, not even for a second. “Hey mom!” he says. His voice sounds weird, too young.
A woman with wild dark hair walks into the kitchen. She’s wearing a dark green workout jacket and she’s out of breath. She startles a bit when she sees us there. Evan zips up the duffel bag and heaves it over his shoulder.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you boys were here,” Evan’s mother says, touching her hair in several places around the crown.

“Hi Mrs. Chapman,” James says. He points his finger at her like a gun and says, “Smokin’.” Evan’s mother blushes and smiles so big it gives me the creeps a little.

“How are you, James?” she says, stepping forward until she sees me and turns. “Ryan.” Not a question. She knows me, maybe from the obituary. My mother put in a family photo because she didn’t want Liam to look too tragic, no school photos. It made sense to me, like she was trying to save him from all of those baseball uniform pictures with neon backgrounds. But, man, it pissed off my dad. *What does good and dead at seventeen look like, Catherine? Ha’i i o’u. Tell me.*

“Hello,” I say. I extend my left hand but she ignores it and holds my face in both of her hands. I hold my head real still and look over at James and Evan but they’re playing it off. There’s the beer in the duffel.

“I’m so sorry about your brother,” she says, “My heart just breaks for your family. Your poor mother.” Oh man, please. One dead brother and here they all go with their weepy waterworks. I’m money with full access to the sympathy card and all it’s good for is pinched cheeks, see? She’s going to cry. Mrs. Chapman smells faintly of brine shrimp. Salty. I want a California roll. I want her to take her fucking hands off of me.

“She’s fine. Really,” I lie through my cupped cheeks. When she releases me, she roughs up Evan’s hair and he tells her we’re going to go do some shit, he’ll be back later.

“Don’t say *shit,*” Evan’s mother calls out to our backs.

Back on Ala Ilima Street, before we get to the interstate, James rolls down all of the windows. The stereo is so loud, a thumping pulse of ringing in my ears, I can’t hear anything. Liam’s bed is still unmade. The sheets are still crumpled around his mattress. The blankets dangle off of the edge, gaping, hungry. I wake up in the middle of the night and catch my mother on top of the covers, smelling them. Not crying, just trance-like, smelling. Like she misses him and she didn’t even bother knowing him, catch me? Never missed her yoga.
classes for his ball games, though, right? The sun is warm this time of year, bright enough to burn out your eyes. Bright enough to burn out your memory is what I’m hoping.

James drives past the baseball field and I’m yelling at him to pull over, pull over, and almost forgetting my backpack before I jump out of the car. Liam could run. Fuck, he could. And I’m running, slow at first while I try to swing the bag onto both of my shoulders, and then harder and harder toward the field with its white chalk in perfect, final lines. The backpack is jumping all over the place but it’s not heavy. It’s nothing. It’s like nothing at all.

“Ryan! What the fuck?” Evan yells from the car.

When I reach the baseball diamond, I’m on my knees, breathing hard. He’s not for this shitty ballpark but maybe just a little and I am just so pissed off and I’m ripping the zipper open on my backpack, and I’m pulling out the brown jar—*cider bark urn item number 08822109874*—and it weighs absolutely nothing. I wonder if all of Liam is in there. He should be so much heavier. Like bones and shit, you know. Heavy. He was my brother.

James doesn’t say word one when he finally catches up with me. He just picks up my backpack and puts his hand on my shoulder. I hand him the open jar and he puts the lid back on. The lid. How weird is that? Like fucking Tupperware. I wipe my hands off on my jeans and they leave gray-brown smears across my thighs. We get back into the car and Evan gives me another beer right off the bat. He turns around to hand it to me and rests his arm on the back of the seat. He has one himself, too.

“Your mom is going to fucking-Ass kill you, Champ. How the hell did you pull that off, anyway?”

“Shut up,” James says, and Evan does.

“Sure you want to do this?” James asks me while we’re getting out of the car. I hold the backpack against my chest and nod. We’re going to jump like Liam, for the . . . like to get to his *mana*, his essence, dig?

When you get a driver’s license, you bring girls up to the cliffs—way up high where they’re not afraid to take off their shirts. The water is black and reflects the lights of Honolulu. It gets people feeling loved and lonely at the same time. That’s what Liam said. *Loved and lonely at the same time.* I’ve never been up here before, but he’s right. The sun is
getting low and scatters mirrored streaks across the waves. You wouldn’t think about the ocean having a floor, would you? Just water and sand, nothing.

James pulls a bag of marijuana out of his inside jacket pocket. We all sit on the rocks, not too close to the edge, and look out at the city. James pinches weed in pieces, pulling the seeds, and settles it before rolling the paper between his thumbs and forefingers, licking the edge. He just holds it in his hand for awhile, looking out at the water, then leans back onto his elbows and looks up at the sky. He lights the joint, inhales, holds his breath. When he exhales, he coughs out small, hazy puffs. He passes the joint to Evan. We drink the beers from Evan’s bag, the cracking tabs and the sound of the water against the rocks below, us holding our breaths and breathing out in coughing gusts.

The sun is glittering, almost gone, sitting on the edge of the sky where the land is a jagged knife. I open my backpack and pull out the brown jar. I take off the lid—the lid—and I push my fingers into the ashes. They’re gritty and smooth. I pull my hand out of the jar and run my index finger across my cheek, like a ballplayer’s face paint.

“Oh shit. Ohshitohshit,” Evan is laughing uncontrollably. “Ryan, that’s some screwed up shit, Champ.”

I look directly at James, my cousin, and I reach into the jar again. I dare him to fucking touch me. I *dare* him. I run a line across my other cheek. I stand up and pour ashes into my hand, rub my hand against my chest, under my t-shirt, over it. Liam’s bed is still unmade. Liam could run. Liam’s invincible arms and muscles like ropes and a head caved in by the ocean floor and a jar of ashes. I dump ashes into my pockets so my mother will smell Liam when she does my laundry. I face the ocean. Fuck it, the darkness of it. I am not loved and lonely at the same time.

“Iwi, Ryan, you don’t have to do that.” Iwi. Bones of the dead. James is really scared. He sounds like a little kid and he doesn’t know. I do. I have to.

I give it a running start and Evan is scrambling behind me, then past, whooping and laughing, over the land and into the slick air. But I stop at the last of it; I can’t jump. James is next to me and he’s watching Evan, Evan screaming in the water like a rabid mad fighting dog.
“Stupid hulo,” James says, shaking his head. He takes his shirt off, pulling it over his head with one hand. He leaves his jeans crumpled in the dirt, shaking his foot out of the last leg.

“We go together.” James looks at me. James in his tube socks and me still clutching the jar, with Liam’s ashes all over.

When my feet leave the edge, when there is nothing but blackness and the sound of the water, I miss my brother. I am so alive and I miss Liam and there’s no getting to his fucking mana because it is—poof—gone. I hit the water and let go of Liam’s jar. My feet touch the bottom, push me back up to the surface. Evan and James are floating on their backs, making small wet sounds with their feet in the sea. It’s like we’re all just digging the huge depth of the ocean and there isn’t a floor to it, the feeling. Just water and sand and everything.

I am fourteen years old and I have stolen a car. I have stolen my brother’s ashes and I don’t want to feel what I feel like, man.
ARKANSAS

The heat in Arkansas is wet. It saturates everything, suffocates. The river gives weight even to clothing, filling the minute gaps in machine-knit cotton, quietly threatening to seep into any dry space and wrench apart bones. It whispers to the young in an intoxicated voice worn smooth by the lapping haze of industry.

My mother was young here. There are many photographs: her long legs behind a push mower, the grass nearly beating the blades; her face thrown back, her dark hair glowing along the edge of her throat just like the horizon’s thin line where the sunsets are intensified by pollution from Little Rock; one arm held up to the camera, proudly showing off an iridescent river frog, her smile is full of white teeth. The house that appears in the backdrop of these photos is ours. The trees, the slope of the yard, the invasive white-wet heat are all familiar. The face is hers too, I know, but I do not recognize her.

“Those old things?” my mother asks from the doorway. She hasn’t surprised me. I heard her coming, the shush-pat of her house shoes on the hall floor punctuated by the rubber bottom thuck-suck-thuck of her cane. Her knees are somehow squarer now, the skin slightly loose around the bones. Her dresses hang strangely, nervously remembering their original shape. Her shoulders cannot fill them, the waistlines fall an inch lower than they should despite the belts she cinches around her small middle.

“I like looking at them,” I say, noticing the gaps of light between her shape and the frame of the door. She moves into the room and sits on the bed next to me, her cane resting against my thigh. She smooths the bedspread with her hand then brushes a few kinked strands of hair from her damp forehead.

“To prove I was young once,” she laughs. “Well, I was, you can put that to rest.”

“You were lovely.” I scoop the photographs together, aligning their ends by stamping them against my palm, then place them carefully back into their box.

“Yes, well, that was a long time ago.” She takes my chin in her hands. My face trembles in time with her palsy. “You take after your father. But you do have my eyes, there’s always that.”

I stand up and push the box beneath the nightstand. Except for the soft whisking of the cardboard along the planks of the floor, there is no evidence of my mother’s youth. It is as if her entire history has been swept from her over the edge of a small shoebox.
“Are we late with supper?” My mother looks around the room anxiously, then places both hands on her cane and pulls her weight from the bed.

“No, we’re right on time. I’ll put on some tea. Do you want waffles?”

“Your father doesn’t drink tea,” my mother says.

“No, he doesn’t,” I agree, lifting my arm around her fragile build. We walk toward the doorway in an awkward stride, our combined shadow is a donkey favoring its hind leg. My father has been dead for seventeen years.

If my mother ever heard Arkansas taunting her, she was either too reckless or too mean to care. The summer I turned thirteen, she planted the apple orchard behind our house. It took her long days with a shovel, the heat soaking her black hair and pulling up blisters from her palms, her dresses clinging to the curves of her strong, sunned body. All summer she was a shape contorted by waves of hot air that, instead of rising, draped themselves sweetly over us, smothering.

The first year they didn’t bear fruit, she threatened the trees by whittling small rings around their trunks with a paring knife. She pressed the blade softly into their bark, pushing into the almond fibers beneath. She was a collared bully frantically hissing nasty promises to her victim while being hauled off the playground.

“This is what you’ll get next year, you sons of bitches forgive me Lord Jesus but that’s what you’ll get, you hear me?” Mother didn’t pray except to make a point. Instead, she shook her fist at the earth and the next year it gave her apples out of fright.

I was scared into a stiff rail of a girl who tried desperately to grow breasts and failed. Dear Lord, I don’t know what I’ll do if these kids grow up with their daddy’s dumb sense. Those ears on Cole, Lord, keep an eye on those, please. Also, let Anna grow into her dresses so the boys’ll be able to tell her from a fencepost. She’s a nice girl but we both know nice by itself gets girls married to mules. Amen.

At the breakfast table, Mother sips her tea carefully.

“Anna? Why is there an ice cube in my tea?” she asks, confused.

“Because you sometimes forget that the tea is hot and burn yourself.”
“Oh, yes. Smart girl. The boys don’t appreciate smart, though, do they?” My mother’s face is full and bright. For a moment, I regret adding the ice cube to her tea.

The morning sun heats up the windows in our kitchen and the condensation shines like loose coin in shallow water. I can feel the air waiting, hungry, checking its watch while we perform our routine. When the telephone rings, Mother cocks her head to the side and says, “The oven!” Then, “Someone get the telephone!”

“Got it,” I say to her and “Hello?” into the receiver.

“Anna? Annie? Is that you?”

“It’s me,” I say.

“Listen, Annie, I’ve run into some trouble up here with the kids, with Charlene. I don’t think I’ll be able to come down for that visit after all.” Even at forty-eight, my brother’s voice shakes when he’s lying.

“Mother was really looking forward to seeing you,” I say. There are children in the background, noise, some kind of station, maybe. A movie theater. A carnival. A strip-tease show. The backseat of an expensive company car. Wherever he is, the air is clean.

“Is that Cole?” Mother asks. She starts to pull herself up from a kitchen chair but sits back again when I motion to her. Cole’s voice is loud through the phone.

“I know, I know and I’m sorry. I really . . . we really appreciate everything you’ve done,” he stammers a bit. Cole wears crisp dress shirts to work and worries about mortgages and business sales.

“‘Everything’ sounds about right.” I nod at Mother over the telephone cord. She sips her tea, pokes the ice cube to the bottom of the cup with a thin finger, smiles.

“Aw, come on Annie, don’t be like that. You know I can’t help it, the kids, the job, it’s just . . .”

“Here’s Mom,” I say loudly, cheerfully, and hand the phone to Mother. She holds the receiver with both hands, carefully. When she presses it to her ear, she becomes a child holding a wrapped gift to her face. Her eyes are round and clear.

“Cole? Cole?” she says. Then, “Uh huh. Yes, don’t I know it, son. Oh, yes, she’s here. Well I’ll expect you Tuesday. Yes, okay, goodbye.” There are long pauses between her sentences and I can hear the buzz of Cole making conversation. Finally, Mother hands the phone back to me.
“It’s me again. What about what we discussed earlier?” I ask curtly. There was a life I put on hold but the days have somehow both shrunken and stretched into endless afternoons, and that life floats in the distance in the same manner that heat hovers in waves over asphalt on the hottest days.

“About Mom?” Cole is playing dumb and I hate him for it.

“Yes.”

“Well, about that, Annie. Uhm. Charlene doesn’t think it’s a good idea to have her here with us. She’s afraid Mother would be dangerous with the kids.”

“Your kids are old enough to drive cars, Cole.”

There is only stillness on the other end of the line. I can imagine the light Western air on Cole’s face. He is holding his breath or he has hung up.

“Cole?” I wait.

He sighs heavily. “Kiddo, I can’t. I’m sorry. I’m real, real sorry, but we can’t take her.”

I bang the phone into its cradle.

“Shit,” I yell. “Shit.” I press my forehead to the crackling wallpaper. It makes a giving noise like the cellophane windows of junk mail envelopes. I place my palm on the back of my neck and breathe heavily. I hear the clang as Mother’s cane drops to the tiled floor. Her hand is on my back, pecking, reassuring.

“We should probably get you ready for cards now,” I chirp, my eyes closed, my forehead still against the wall.

“Anna, it’s okay. It’s okay. Cole’s coming to dinner this Tuesday,” she says, patting my shoulder.

“No, he’s not. Cole has a family and he lives in California and he’s sure as shit not getting on an airplane to have dinner with us.”

I am so angry that I tell her the truth. Her hand falls away from my shoulder.

“I know Cole has a wife. Her name is Clarissa,” she says, surprised at my outburst. In her voice there is a subtle disbelief, a muddled recognition of something, a vague thing, lost. When she knows she’s forgetting things, these moments are worse than when she doesn’t remember at all.
The Arkansas heat holds my mother’s memory, a fine thing wrapped in damp linen. It has steeped itself in the long years of her childhood, my own childhood, and it has sucked on the bones of every small thing we’ve forgotten, grown stronger than our own fleshy lives. But that isn’t only what we gave.

My brother moved to California the same year he tried to force Matthew Wilcox, the only boy half-serious about me, to make things right by proposing marriage. Matthew showed up on our doorstep with an eye already beginning to swell, split just below the brow, an ugly tear in his sweet, moon-shaped face. His shirt was half-on and buttons were missing. You could tell he’d been squarely whipped.

“I can’t,” Matthew said with his face to the ground, his feet turned inward on themselves. “I can’t.” His voice choked and he turned his head away from me altogether. He never finished his sentence. He didn’t have to.

Lord, please let Anna’s future husband which will not be Matthew Wilcox because he is a deserting bastard, Lord excuse me for that, let Anna’s future husband not be horrified by the scar on her shoulder where that funny mole was removed and she received three stitches. She’s a good girl but just between us, God, no one will believe it. Amen.

Cole came home shortly after, with his shirt not the least bit disheveled. He played ball all through high school. He knew how to swing a bat and, well, I suppose also his fists. Cole walked up our drive with his shirt sleeves rolled up, the heavy air strangling the cool cotton against his torso, and that was all.

“You pick yourself up a coffee, sit outside, get some sun,” Lorraine Coldwater, my mother’s sister, says to me. Her hands clap together dryly, a muffled, swallowed sound. Lorraine sits with Mother every Thursday while I run errands. I check the emergency phone numbers list repeatedly, picking up and putting down the folded piece of paper. My black heels rap on the flooring, my lilac skirt swishes lazily against my calves and scrapes against the burlap shopping bag I use for groceries.

“I think Anna has a date,” Lorraine says to my mother over their cards.

“A date?” Mother’s face is flushed, she remembers enough not to believe Lorraine.

“I’m telling you, the girl is going out. I know when a man is sniffing around a place.” Lorraine grins, satisfied, and takes a card from the draw pile. Her fingers are weighted in
rings from many ex-husbands. The jewels reflect light in blues and greens. Her fingers appear to grow directly from shining circles of metal and polished stone.

“Thanks again,” I say, finally walking to the front door. As I push the door closed, I hear Mother. Her voice is worried, panicked from more than thirty years ago.

“Maybe she’ll miscarry, Lorraine. There’s always that.”

The grocery store is filled with aisles of gleaming labels. The dusty yellow light falls on rows of shining cans like mica-flecked silt over bedrock. The wide glass doors slide open and shut, letting in then cutting off an ominous rush of heat thrown up from the asphalt outside. While weighing heads of green cabbage, heavy with water, the heels of my shoes slide imperceptibly on the hard-waxed floor. For one brief moment, with the large doors automatically sealing themselves closed, the cool mist of the produce section hovering, the eerie call for an assistant manager to aisle five: I float. My shoes are hardly touching the thin layer of varnish on the floor. My feet are hardly touching my shoes. I am hardly tethered at all. I try to recreate the sensation and fail.

Later, I sit on the flat, concrete edge of the city’s fountain. Water arcs inward to the center of the pool in loud, wet flares. I hold the groceries on my lap; leafy produce and sharp cans cradled in the scratchy shopping bag, its looped wooden handles nodding off to one side. Closing my eyes, I lean back as far as I trust my knees to hold the concrete. I breathe in, trying to find the space where the cooler water from the fountain meets the vapors evaporating from the warmer edges. A child’s squeal has me sitting upright instantly: two small girls, wading through the water in their bathing suits. I can only imagine what their shampooed hair must smell like.

It is possible to blame the Arkansas heat for most anything and not be wrong. I was seventeen the year I lived across the river with my Aunt Lorraine who was recently divorcing a third husband and in need of household assistance while she worked on bloodying him good for a few rounds in court.

“I’ve got him whipped now, Anna. Offered me the car! Son of a bitch thinks he’ll have _me_ over a barrel? I’ve been divorced twice already. Hell, my last divorce was practically the goddamn precedent!” Lorraine was wild then, with Mother’s thick hair but a
snake’s mischievous eyes that were all her own. She enchanted men and ruined them just as fast.

_Lord, please maybe let nature take its course with Anna if you catch my drift. These things happen and it’s Your will and it sure would be nice if You’d stick to the plan we agreed on. Also, thank you for my sister, I never thought her divorcing would be a convenience. Amen._

Mother brought apples from her trees—brisk, red apples with pale green streaks near their cores, thin seeds slick as beetles—and we ate them in everything. We made applesauce, apple butter, apple jam, sugar-curried apple spread. We sliced them over steaming bowls of oats, sautéed them with chicken and cranberries, put them into pies, ice creams, tortes, muffins, cakes. We sprinkled them with cinnamon and dried them in rings on the back porch, we sank our teeth into their skins, wiped the juice on our sleeves.

I grew heavy with more than the apples—a large, breathing weight in my center, pulling away from my spine and down, out. Out into the sweaty, humid air of Arkansas. Out to Lorraine’s waiting arms, then to another woman’s. I was still a girl, still thought I could escape it; my history, my mistakes. But when he cried, my breasts ached with something like the tautness in a voice about to crack with tears, something like the frozen second before a tipped glass hits the floor.

“This is as broke as you’ll ever be,” Lorraine said solemnly, her fingers on my shoulder, trembling with exhaustion and hesitation. It is possible to refuse to name the boy who should be made responsible, though people are smart enough to guess. People will cite the crazy history of girls before you, like you, whose sanity was leeched out of their own pretty heads by the tyrannical mugginess of the South. It is easier to blame Arkansas for what is just life.

Mother’s knees in the bathwater are pulled up to her bare chest, her breasts soft and translucent. The bones along her spine are small digits, knots in a string that binds her. A pitcher takes in water with a drowning gulp. I tilt her head back with my palm. She closes her eyes, hums a little, and I pour the water over her thinning hair. The fine strands race down her neck, harmless white garden snakes. Bending down against the porcelain tub, my knees press into the hard tiles on the floor. My mother’s fingers grip either side of the basin loosely,
trusting. I pour a small amount of shampoo into my hand, work it into her scalp in sudsy circles, send small torrents of soap down her back and into the bathwater. She sighs, pulling her knees away from her chest and easing them beneath the surface. The mirrors have steamed over. When I was a child, she bathed me like this, her rough hands careful with me, almost patient.

“I know who you are,” she says to reassure herself.

“Oh, of course you do.” I dip the pitcher and it sucks in water with a gasp.

“No, don’t do that. I mean I know you. Never with Cole. Men can’t bear to look it in the eyes, this life. Don’t want to pay a little bit of bitter for all that sweet. But you, you’re strong and you’re mine.” This is not to reassure herself.

As a girl, I liked to walk barefoot in the shaded grass of the orchard. I knew there were bees, Mother had warned me to wear sandals, to avoid clover patches. But the cool give of the grass beneath my feet was such an indulgent pleasure, so delicious a feeling.

I look at her in the bathwater. These same sharp bones had scooped me from the grass without effort and carried me to the back porch of our house. Holding my foot in one hand, using the other to smear mud on my heel to take out the stinger, she’d wink at me. No Dear Lord or anything. Just patted my foot and winked, every time, like we were in on a secret. The bees always stung and I never felt cheated.

“Anna? Just for a minute, by myself, please,” she says, leaning away, resting her head against the back of the tub. I am not frozen, just still. My hand holds the pitcher, ready to pour. I am worried she will lose herself, swallow water. “Please,” she says again, moving her hand over mine, lowering the pitcher.

I will leave her only for a moment. It is likely she will forget how long I have been gone, her memory is so much worse at night. I sit at her old vanity, light the few lavender candles spread over lacework, pick up her paddle brush with the lacquered handle. I run my thumb over the bristles, watch them flick back defiantly. When I run the brush through my hair, I see my face in the mirror.

My hair is wiry in a way that only age allows. There are lines in my face, small crinkles around my eyes. My lips are thinner than I ever remembered, paler. And Arkansas is all around me, its sweet, taunting whisper. I run the brush through my hair. I stand and, looking into my own strange face, press the bristles against my scalp softly. I wanted a little
blue house in the city without a yard, on streets that were only the slightest bit unsafe after
dark. A man, a dog, a collection of expensive handbags, not just a little thrill. But it is okay.
My mother is right about me.
Nettie lives with her two younger sisters and her mother in the brown house, the one with two bedrooms. If she had a brother, Nettie would get to live in the yellow house down the street with four bedrooms and big windows. They aren’t houses, actually. They’re trailer homes. Her father would spend nights at their house more often if they weren’t only girls. No one says this to Nettie, she just knows it.

Nettie’s family reads *The Book of Mormon* like other Latter-Day Saints, but she goes to a different church, the Right One held in the basement of her neighbor’s house. *The Book of Mormon* says a lot of things, like don’t drink coffee or tea but Diet Coke is okay. Or you can’t smoke cigarettes or gamble but you can eat meat on Good Friday because you’re not Catholic. Also, have lots of babies because it’s your duty to bring all of the souls waiting in Heaven to Earth before Jesus can come back and do His thing, save the good and punish the wicked.

That’s why Nettie’s father has lots of different houses. Nettie’s whole family wouldn’t fit into one house, which means they’re doing their share to bring souls to Earth and hurry up already with The Second Coming. They’re fundamentalists but they don’t use that word. The U.S. government is run by heathens so Nettie’s neighborhood has an eight-foot wall around it. They are building a special school, too. Nettie is relieved because it means no more teasing about how her dresses match all of her sisters’ and did they make the dresses themselves or are they charity cases?

“My mother says you’re on The Dole. Are you?” Nettie’s friend Elizabeth asks one afternoon during lunch.

“What’s The Dole?” Nettie takes a bite of her tuna-salad sandwich and grimaces when she hits the celery. She hates celery. She gives the inside of her cheek a quick bite as a reminder: don’t be ungrateful. God dislikes that.

“It’s when other people give their money so you can eat. They have a special book of coupons so your mom can buy food for free. But everyone else has to pay your way. Like freeloading.”

Nettie thinks about grocery shopping with her mother. She knows these colorful coupons; she’s seen her mother tear them from a booklet. She’s seen all of the mothers who live in her neighborhood with those coupons but she’s pretty sure God provides.
“Nah, we’re not on The Dole.” Nettie doesn’t know if she’s on The Dole and, since she doesn’t know, God would want her to give her own mother the benefit of the doubt. Wouldn’t He?

“Welfare? How about welfare? My dad says you all should stop having kids if you can’t feed them yourself.”

“My mom feeds us,” Nettie says, pointing to her sandwich.

“Yeah,” Elizabeth responds. “She put celery in it again, didn’t she?”

Nettie isn’t allowed over to Elizabeth’s house because Elizabeth’s parents are nonbelievers. Nettie’s mother worries that she’ll watch Dirty Dancing or hear the F word. Nettie has never said the F word but Elizabeth says it under her breath when their fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Meyer, returns their math tests. Elizabeth sounds like a real sinner when she swears but God doesn’t seem too angry about it. Maybe He understands that Elizabeth has a hard time with numbers.

“Are you in a cult?” Elizabeth asks on the playground. She drops a ball and scoops up three jacks.

“I don’t think so,” Nettie says, writing down Elizabeth’s score.

“What’s with that big wall around your place, then? What are you doing in there?”

“Just the usual stuff. I don’t know. Sometimes I babysit the smaller kids or practice piano or sew or swing or draw.” Nettie watches Elizabeth grab a few more jacks, their metal feet dancing in her palm.

“Do they pay you for babysitting?”

“No, it’s my spiritual obligation to help out my family,” Nettie says. She takes the ball from Elizabeth and drops it. It bounces once and she sweeps up two jacks.

“Sounds like a fucking rip-off, if you ask me.”

“Don’t say the F word,” says Nettie.

Nettie’s mother cleans house for the Williams family. Mrs. Williams is a tall woman with thick legs and hair like Jackie O. Lauren, her only daughter, is exceptionally round and surly. Mrs. Williams ignores Lauren’s roundness and buys her inappropriately sized clothes.
The Williams are also nonbelievers. Instead of paintings of Christ, they hang up paintings of naked women eating fruit.

Occasionally, Nettie goes with her mother and helps with the dusting or the vacuuming. She likes vacuuming the winding staircase the best, leaving perfect horizontal lines in the carpeting and wiping the banister so it gleams. They do not have such nice things in their own home. Nettie knows coveting is a sin, but she pushes her fingers into the wooly fibers of the carpeting and nearly weeps with the desire to run her tongue over it. What kind of a girl wants to taste carpeting? What would it be like to wake in rooms like these? Where you don’t even have to believe in Jesus?

Nettie’s father is an accountant for Brinkley and Sons, one of the top firms in Utah. He says it is very important for Nettie and her sisters to keep their family protected from the U.S. government. They are never to speak about her father outside of the neighborhood. They are never to refer to it as The Compound, either, because it isn’t funny.

“We’re not Waco. No one is stockpiling weapons here.” Her father shakes his head over dinner. He looks at Nettie and she instantly feels embarrassed by her own body.

“You girls aren’t asked about our neighborhood at school, are you?” Nettie’s mother asks, setting a plate of vegetables onto the dinner table and sitting down.

“No, ma’am,” Nettie’s sisters reply.
“Elizabeth asks me why we have the big fence,” Nettie says.
“Tell her ‘good fences make good neighbors’ then, Nets.” Her father spoons peas onto his plate. “And then ask yourself if you should be socializing with someone who hasn’t accepted Jesus Christ as her personal savior.”

It is a late night halfway into the school year.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” Nettie’s dad sobs at the edge of her bed, readjusting his shirt, buckling his belt. Nettie is embarrassed, aching. Her sisters pretend to be asleep, but she knows their breathing. They are wide awake. They hear everything.

“Dear Heavenly Father, please. Dear Heavenly Father, please.” He repeats this over and over again, his hands trembling.
Eventually, Nettie reaches across her blanket, afraid. “Sir,” she says. Maybe she can console him, forgive him, or better understand.

Her father turns toward her in the dark. “You,” he hisses. “This is your. You don’t.”

At school the next day, Nettie asks Elizabeth if her father has only one house.
“Of course! We’re not moneybags or anything,” Elizabeth laughs.
“No, I mean, does your dad sleep only at your house or does he sometimes sleep at different houses?”

Elizabeth’s face twists up in a confused way.
“Never mind,” says Nettie. Elizabeth’s family has definitely not accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior.

On one of their drives, on the way to the Williams’s house, Nettie looks at her mother behind the steering wheel.
“Mom?”
“Yes?” Her mother seems anxious, focusing on the street signs as though she has never been on these roads before.
“Are we on The Dole?”
Her mother’s knuckles turn white, they grip the steering wheel so hard. She does not look at Nettie but her eyes change.
“Where did you hear that?” she demands.
“Are we?” Nettie prods. Her mother doesn’t answer. Her mouth is a thin line.

At the Williams’s house, Lauren answers the door wearing a pink sweater that is slightly too small. Her belly reminds Nettie of Winnie-the-Pooh. Lauren looks uncomfortable and keeps pulling the sweater away from her body.
“We have kittens,” Lauren says.
“Kittens! That’s wonderful, Lauren. Congratulations,” Nettie’s mother says in her singing voice. She puts her buckets and towels down on the shining wood floors of the foyer. (Lauren says it “foy-eh” and tells Nettie “foy yer” makes her sound like a real hick).
“They’re not old enough to see yet,” Lauren says and walks off, leaving the door open. “Nettie, you can come, though,” she calls out, still walking away.

The kittens look like small rodents; their eyes are still sealed shut and their mouths open and close without much sound. Their downy limbs jerk randomly; this whole moving thing is so new. Lauren places a white one in Nettie’s open palms.

“I haven’t named them yet.”

“They’re so tiny. What are you going to do with all of them?” Nettie whispers over the blind rodent in her hands.

“My mother says we have to sell them. I’ll get to keep one.”

“But how will you decide?” The kitten gums Nettie’s index finger.

“Whichever is the prettiest,” Lauren says, looking shocked that there might be another way. She pulls her sweater away from her stomach. Nettie places the kitten back into the cardboard box with its littermates. She is on The Dole.

After dinner, Nettie helps her mother with the dishes. Her mother’s eyes are tired, as if she’s lost many, many board games, but her voice is always a shiny veneer.

“If your homework is finished, we can read scriptures tonight,” her mother says, watching the sink fill with suds. Nettie nods and picks up a dish towel.

“Mom, do you ever wish he had just one family, like Elizabeth’s dad?” Nettie asks.

“God has a plan for each of us, honey. I know it’s difficult to share your own father, but we are one family.” Her mother’s hands circle a plate with soapy water.

“But I mean a normal family.” Nettie stops short of saying she hates her weird family. She sucks in air sharply, holding back tears she cannot explain.

“Oh, honey,” her mother lets the plate fall back into the sink, “It’s hard to be different.” She takes the towel, cupping Nettie’s face in both of her soft hands. “You’re such a fortunate girl. God has something special in mind for you.”

Her mother’s breath in her face is sweet licorice. Nettie feels a searing wound in her chest and, at that moment, she longs for a secret they might share between them. Nettie needs a secret like the secret of the saved, something to pull her permanently into The Fold. Perhaps that is why Nettie tells her mother.

“He prays at night, in my room, afterward,” Nettie whispers.
“What?”

“He cries and prays and I’m afraid God isn’t going to forgive him,” Nettie rushes. Her mother’s hands drop and, like a taught cotton string pulled through wet clay, Nettie is cleaved from her, separate in her knowledge.

“Nettie! What a thing to suggest!” Her mother’s face is white and she returns to the sink. Looking down at the dishwater, her hands thoughtlessly repeat the motion over each plate she holds. After some time, her mother looks up, her eyes two sharp stones. “Shame on you.”

“Doesn’t God hit you with a lightning bolt or something for stealing?” Elizabeth asks, staring into the sealed eyes of the kitten Nettie has stolen from Lauren Williams. It mews and sucks on the edge of Nettie’s hand.

“Yeah, but this was a rescue,” Nettie says.

“So, no lightning bolt?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What are you going to do with it?” Elizabeth rubs the kitten’s head with the tips of her fingers.

“I don’t know yet.”

At the end of the day, Elizabeth and Nettie run to the bushes lining the schoolyard. Nettie pulls a shoebox from under one of the bushes and lifts its lid. The kitten’s fur looks dead. Nettie scoops the small cat from the box and places her ear against his tiny body.

“Nettie?” Elizabeth is a little pukey. “Nettie? You okay?”

Nettie kneels there for a long time, staring at the dead kitten in her hands. She thinks of herself. She thinks of her father: Dear Heavenly Father, please forgive me. Dear Heavenly Father, please forgive me. Only he can’t get out the forgive. She sways a little back and forth, rocking the kitten or maybe herself. God isn’t going to be doing any forgiving, ever. Then, it comes.

“Fuck,” she whispers. Then, louder and nonstop, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!” She doesn’t care if God hears her.
THE TAKING

A STORY

A woman in her mid-thirties with light blue eyes and ruddy hair is invited to a dinner party. She arrives in a pale green sheath dress, the color of celery, and expensive shoes. She brings a bottle of wine instead of a date and manages to tell several jokes despite being a rather shy person. Most people at the party have too much to drink, including the hostess, who leaves a pair of earrings on the bathroom counter. The earrings have sentimental value, which makes them irreplaceable. Late in the evening, while washing her hands, the woman in the celery dress notices the earrings on the counter. She knows they belong to the hostess, who is only steps away from the bathroom door telling a story about her eldest child. The woman takes the earrings from the counter and tries them on. She takes them home.

SOME FACTS

The woman’s name is Katrina. She grew up in a house with white carpeting that was vacuumed into thick, horizontal lines. Her parents, both living, paid for her college tuition without complaint. Her older brother, Caleb, is routinely hospitalized for schizophrenia. Though she has received numerous speeding tickets, Katrina has never been arrested. She pays $195 every six weeks for a cut-and-color job at a trendy hair salon. Her waist is tiny and her shoulders are square. Katrina has impeccable posture—her spine never moves but her ponytail always swishes against the matte black wool of her suit jacket. Katrina becomes painfully coy around men—all of them—and this makes women distrust her.

Katrina has been working at an accounting firm for over ten years. She likes the unflinching truth of numbers; balancing columns of expenses against columns of profit. Her boss and his wife have several children and Katrina sits for them occasionally, which is why she is routinely invited to their dinner parties. She has been sleeping with her boss for the past four years. He is handsome and kind. He buys expensive shoes, Manolo Blahniks and Valentinos, and has them delivered to her at work because he enjoys the look of embarrassment and excitement on her face when she opens the box at her desk. They spend a lot of time in pricey hotels around Chicago. Katrina wears extravagant footwear and nothing else. She does not believe his declarations of love but instead kisses him and thinks of herself when she was very young.
While her boss rests his graying head against her chest, he says he loves to listen to her heartbeat. He tells her it sounds like a frantic bird trapped in a warehouse—its flapping wings again and again against the hollow of her rib cage. Katrina doesn’t respond. She thinks of Caleb, her brother, and how his dark curls that once flopped messily against his ears are now also flecked with gray. He is over forty now. She thinks of Caleb’s thin teenage wrists wrapped in leather cuffs, his Stones t-shirt with the holes along the collar, a pencil in his hand. She thinks of sitting on his rumpled bed, leaning against the cold wall, trying to hold still for a drawing in his sketchbook.

“You have the face for magazines, Katie,” Caleb had teased her. “If you didn’t have such an awful personality, eh, maybe.” He had shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

Katrina thinks of how hard she tried to keep from giving him the finger and ruining her position. When her boss moves his hand to her breast, she is smiling. He mistakes her smile for devotion.

THE TRUTH

Katrina is afraid to swim. Her boss does not know this when he sneaks her into the Plaza’s pool after hours. Plastic tables line the walls and lounge chairs have been stacked in neat rows. The submerged lights of the swimming pool waver in and out of the glowing water. She does not go into the pool but sits along the concrete edge, her legs dangling, her feet mottled by the chlorinated blue of the water. Her boss surfaces, his graying hair darkened, and places both of his wet, wide hands on Katrina’s pale thighs. He tells her she is beautiful and presses his scruffy cheek against her knee. He says he will leave his wife if Katrina will just say the word. It is safe for him to say these things because Katrina is a grown woman; but his face is so earnest, so bright, that she knows he believes himself. She thinks of the summer her parents had given her a bright red one-piece with white racing stripes up the sides. Caleb had taken her out to the deep end of the pool. Clinging to his shoulders, she felt the strength of Caleb’s kicking legs, the steady rhythm of his breathing, and, for a moment, she believed they were the same person born eight years apart.

Her boss presses his lips to her thigh and she thinks of the mossy green bottom of the pool and how the water had lapped against her small chin. She thinks of how rapidly her
heart jumped when Caleb placed her hands on the edge of the pool and swam several feet away.

“Swim back to me,” he had said firmly. His look acknowledged what all of Katrina’s friends had been telling her: She was too old for arm floaties. “Come back to me. It’s just a little way.”

She thinks of how unwillingly she had let go and how frantically she had dog paddled toward her brother. The depth of the water had overwhelmed her, an unfathomable end of dark green, and she had gone under. Caleb’s arms had quickly pulled her up. He had laughed wildly while she sputtered, embarrassed, then cried.

“Oh, now. Come on.” Grinning, he had pulled her closer and pressed his nose up against hers. “You’re fine. I’m right here.”

When Katrina bends forward to kiss her boss, she does not let go of the edge of the pool.

At the end of the dinner party where she has done her best to appear comfortable, Katrina is washing her hands in the bathroom. A pair of earrings has been left on the counter. She knows they belong to her boss’s wife; Katrina noticed earlier how they had created a soft line against her throat.

She pushes the thin wires through the holes in her ears. The earrings are simple—large, obsidian circles framed in filigreed silver that flash back the florescent lighting of the bathroom in sharp, glinting streaks. She looks into the small mirror above the sink and tucks a few coppery feathers of her hair behind her ear.

She remembers Caleb’s face—his fat, puffy face—how the medication had made his sharp seventeen-year-old features swell. She had looked away from the television for just a second and seen his eyes. It was the moment she’d lost him, the moment something in his brain had opened up a billowing infection of blackness.

“Caleb?” she had called to him from her place on the floor. His shoulders were slightly hunched. He mumbled incoherently and stared through the television, visions swirling in his head. She sat up and cocked her head to the side, unsure if he was teasing her. His pupils were dilated—round discs of nothingness expanding, moving into the color of his irises.
“Caleb?” This time, slightly panicked. She had called for her mother then, scared at the vacancy spreading across his features, his strange sentences, his unblinking eyes. Katrina had felt the chemicals in Caleb’s brain cutting a wide canyon between them, had felt the wind blowing across the new space that separated them forever. She placed both of her hands against his fleshy cheeks and turned his face toward her own, pressing her nose against Caleb’s, rubbing back and forth softly.

“Caleb, come back. Come back,” she said quietly, her voice thrown down a dark well, her breath hot in his still face. There was no echo.

The earrings dangle from her lobes, standing out darkly against her light hair. The black orbs glitter, infinitely deep and inaccessible, and Katrina sucks in her breath sharply. She hears her boss’s wife outside of the bathroom door, laughing, telling a story about their eldest child, the one who loves Monopoly and grilled cheese sandwiches. She hears his magnificent laughter and can imagine how sweetly her boss must also kiss his wife, how much he must love her and how much she doesn’t know. How impossible it is to navigate the gap. The earrings shine vacantly and Katrina pulls them from her ears. Cupping them in her hand, she drops them into the dark silk of her coat pocket when she rejoins the party to say goodnight. Her boss, a flush of pride across his cheeks, is smiling over the head of his wife. His affable eyes are faintly crinkled at the edges. She was not thinking of him when she took his wife’s earrings from the bathroom counter.
NECESSARY INSTRUMENTS

Nicholas came downstairs wearing a pair of loose navy sweatpants. The open sides of his striped robe flared behind him, the cotton belt drooped lazily against his lower back, his bare feet warm on the hardwood stairs. Mornings with his family contented him in a simple, easy way that he hadn’t experienced as a child. It made him feel successful.

He heard his wife speaking to his daughter softly, the gurgling bubble of the coffee maker, the quiet sound of loose change dropped into an empty vase—the dog’s tags as it rolled onto its side, legs stretched out in the rectangle of morning sun shining through the kitchen windows. His one splurge, the Sunday Times, would be waiting on the table, its thick rolls of newsprint still neatly half curled despite Joanna’s habit of removing the magazine. He waited for a moment in the hallway, relishing their voices before entering the kitchen.

“Hi, Daddy,” Beatrice said somberly. Nicholas’s seven-year-old daughter leaned back into the stiff maple kitchen chair, crossed her legs on the seat, and pulled her Aladdin nightgown over her knees, tucking it beneath each foot. She bit her lip, worrying it, scrunching her eyebrows together. Joanna turned from the counter holding a coffee mug, the handle wrapped around her fingers, her thumb along the rim.

“Morning, girls,” Nicholas said, moving toward Joanna and the coffee pot. “What’s the matter, Beatrice?” he asked while pouring himself a cup. The plastic lid of the carafe clicked back into the machine and he could smell the citrus of Joanna’s hair.

“Posie has a hurt leg,” Beatrice answered, both arms pulled into the nightgown tent she’d made with her knees. Her dark hair was a crazy nest on the back of her head but stuck smoothly against her cheeks near her face. With herself all balled up on the kitchen chair, his daughter was a small, blue egg, contained, protected.

“Daddy’s going to look at her in just a minute,” Joanna said in her parent voice-over tone. She raised her eyebrows and gave an “uh oh” cringe to Nicholas, shaking her head quickly before Beatrice caught on.

Posie was Beatrice’s lop-eared bunny. They’d discovered the rabbit in the back of a pet store in town. Beatrice wasn’t like the other children who begged for the rowdy lab puppies in the window boxes with woodchips clinging to their slick coats. She had been put off by the crowd and gone straight for the hamsters and mice, the lower-scale merchandise.
“Do you want to look at the dogs? We can wait until everyone leaves,” Nicholas suggested.

“Too much hullabaloo, Daddy,” she said, walking backward and pulling Nicholas by the hand further down the rodent aisle. Beatrice had discovered *hullabaloo* in one of her Cranky Crocodile books and used it as a synonym for everything from *riff raff* (William at school) to *double dog dare* (eating Play-Doh). She found the rabbit and lifted it from its large aquarium without Nicholas’s help, held it to her chest and rubbed its ears.

“I think this one,” she said, lifting the rabbit’s face closer to her own. “Yes.”

Nicholas grew up on a small farm in Nebraska where, beneath a heartbreakingly blue sky, yellow-white wheat rustled in waves like the silk skirt of a woman’s dress in the wind. He’d raised rabbits, kept them in wire cages stacked four high in one of the smaller barns his father kept for orphaned calves. He sold most of the rabbits to neighbors and, when things were particularly tight at home, he’d give a few to his mother. Nicholas wouldn’t eat at those meals. His younger brothers and sisters assumed he didn’t care for chicken but Nicholas didn’t have the temperament. He could categorize, separate the pets from the livestock, but he felt his stomach turn at how simply he recognized the weak or the ill, those that would make good meals or those that would be better bred, how easily he could make those final decisions. It was what made him a man and he hated it.

Afternoons, he’d sit on the back porch with Dinah, his steel gray weimaraner with a blue ribbon boxed head, and let a few of his rabbits out on the lawn so she could fetch them. Dinah had the softest mouth, bred for retrieval. She could bring a man a bird, carry it back to him by its neck, lay it at his feet, and the duck would jump up with a flutter, stunned but unharmed. So delicate, so careful of her own strength, that dog.

It did not occur to the rabbits that they should scatter themselves, attempt escape. Instead, the males chased one another, territorial, fighting over their chances. Others munched lazily, found quiet resting places where they might blink blank-faced at the expanse of green. Nicholas let his rabbits out onto the lawn and Dinah brought them back, one by one, dropping their warm little bodies into Nicholas’s cupped hands so he could put them back into their cages.
“It’s broken, isn’t it?” Joanna said to him, leaning over the rabbit hutch. They’d put on a movie for Beatrice and come out to investigate without her. Posie crouched in the corner of the hutch, favoring a clumsy hind leg. The ends of her fur quivered around her quickly breathing shape.

“Oh yeah,” Nicholas said, tying his robe’s belt around his waist, still looking at the rabbit. “Something startled her. They can kick so hard, they break their own legs.”

“Damn,” she sighed. She pinched the sides of her nose near the corner of her eyes, closing them like she was getting a headache. The quiet freckles along her cheekbones glowed with her mood. “Can they even fix that?”

“It’ll be expensive, Jo.”

“How much, do you think?” Her voice was doing the same thing as the rabbit’s fur. Nicholas didn’t want to tell Beatrice either.

“It’s a Sunday, for starters. And then the regular charges. At least six hundred.” Nicholas rubbed his hand back and forth along Joanna’s shoulder blades. They couldn’t afford six hundred dollars. “I’ll take care of it. We shouldn’t leave her like this, in pain.”

“Well, this totally sucks,” Joanna said.

Nicholas used to sit on the back lawn with his rabbits, listening to his parents fighting about money. Sometimes his mother would accuse his father of carrying on with other women, shouting that he never really loved her and that Michael Stronick had always admired her and look at what a terrific life he’d given his wife. But in the short pauses between their shouting, Nicholas could hear something much heavier than dollars or sex. It grew corpulent, that heaviness between them, and because neither could say the right thing, they always said the wrong one. And those said wrong things seemed to be more responsible for the gap between them than any tangible thing.

Nicholas had been the only one to see his father leave. In the early morning light, a felted wool hat pulled low on his head, his father had heaved a single suitcase into the back of the old Ford, the one they needed to haul water for the cattle, and let the truck coast backward out of the drive a ways before starting the engine. His father had seen him standing behind the screen door, arms crossed, and nodded. Looked him right in the eyes and nodded.
at him as if—at sixteen—Nicholas already understood the intimate details of his father’s failures. Not an apology; an acknowledgment of what he couldn’t do.

“God, Nicholas, this is really awful,” Joanna said, handing him the old pillowcase she’d decided upon after he had quickly rattled off the list of what he needed: pillowcase and hammer. “Are you sure we shouldn’t just pay the vet to put her down?”

He loved the way Joanna always called him by his full name, never Nick like the guys at his office. Even if she was upset or angry with him, still always Nicholas. It was dependable; it soothed him.

“Maybe you shouldn’t come along,” he said, taking the floral printed pillowcase from her hand. He opened the top of the hutch and reached in, scooping up the rabbit delicately, thinking of his childhood dog, mindful of holding Posie’s back leg. She kicked once, scratching his forearm. He ignored the bleeding and rubbed the top of her head with his fingers, stroking her velvety ears, shushing her, holding her against his chest with nothing but the thin green pillowcase between them.

“I want to. It’s too terrible to do by yourself,” Joanna said, reaching out to pet Posie’s warm fur. “It’s okay, girl,” she whispered. He smelled oranges in her hair as she bent down to kiss the rabbit. She seemed so like their daughter at that moment that Nicholas felt a sharp sting of affection in his lungs.

As they walked to the farther edges of their yard, away from the windows of the house, Nicholas realized that he had never done this with an audience. He’d always done it alone, in the backyard barn, and carried the dead rabbits to his mother for dinner or sold them, fully alive, to his neighbors. It occurred to him that this might change Joanna, this sort of first-hand knowledge of what he was capable of. She’d grown up in Arizona—Tucson—with a housecat. Something in her eyes might permanently shift, might be altered in a way by what she would see in him. But then, there was the rabbit to consider, too.

The evening before his father left, Nicholas had been carrying the last of his rabbits back to its cage. When they neared the barn, Dinah’s shoulders dropped low and she moved her head forward, one paw held in mid-step. Nicholas had immediately stopped, thinking the dog had spotted a fox or a weasel, and watched Dinah’s face. Her lips pulled back, revealing
teeth set in spotted gums, and she growled. Nicholas heard the guttural sound of distress. He put his hand on the back of Dinah’s neck, where all of her muscles braided together, tense, ready.

“Easy, girl,” he said. His own voice was as exposed as Dinah’s yellow teeth. He stepped toward the noise, around the slatted wood of the open door, along the side of the barn. Nicholas found his father leaning against the paint-flecked wall, a long hay knife between his knees, bright green grass in patches around his denim pants. One of their cows was on its side in the grass, unmoving. Dinah heeled, her growling softer now, confused. His father’s eyes moved upward, stared at Nicholas, helpless.

“She’s bloated, goddammit,” his father muttered, fingering the edge of the hay knife.

Cows have four stomachs. Cheapskates will feed them bad hay, and it will often ferment in their bellies. Trapped by the cow’s own biology, methane will become stuck in one of the four stomachs. Unless the gas can be released, the cow will swell until it is forced to roll over on its side, unable to stand, and it will die. This particular bloated cow was proof of the character of a man: a man willing to cheat his own livestock.

“Don’t have the necessary instrument.” His father shrugged.

“Improvise,” Nicholas said, knowing full well his father didn’t even own a trocar—a metal contraption much like a syringe, made specifically for bloated cattle.

Nicholas moved to take the hay knife from his father, who did not weep with shame into his hands. Instead, he looked away, unembarrassed, while Nicholas spread his hand wide on the hip bone of the grunting cow, measuring his point of attack. Between his third and fourth fingers, splayed across the cow’s quivering hide, Nicholas jammed the knife into the cow and pulled it out in a smooth, efficient gesture. The whites of its eyes bugged in engorged misery and the cow kicked awkwardly. A loud, blubbering sound and the wretched stench of fetid gas overwhelmed Nicholas. Both the sound and the smell were entirely inappropriate to the gravity and gore of the situation. Still, the cow stood.

When Nicholas sat next to his father, leaned up against the splintered wall of the barn, he wasn’t afraid of the stink of desperation coming off of his father’s sweaty clothes. He wasn’t afraid of what he’d done. What started Nicholas to shaking was the way he felt his own eyes shifting by what he’d seen. The way he’d so easily recognized, separated out from the scene itself, what type of man his father was.
When they reached the corner of the yard, Nicholas held Posie with one hand and slipped the pillowcase over her body. In the dark, her breathing slowed and he felt her body relax. Joanna’s back was turned to the two of them, Nicholas and the rabbit, and she was shielding her eyes from the morning sun, peering intently at the windows of their house.

“Is she watching?” Nicholas asked, looking over his shoulder at his wife.

“No, I think we’re good,” Joanna said, still scanning for Beatrice.

“Okay then,” he said, holding his hand out.

“Oh, right.” She dropped her hand from her face and gave the hammer to him. The hammer was part of a toolkit they’d received as a wedding present. The handle was fluorescent yellow. The iron head was worn in places (Joanna had used it to ceremoniously beat their mailbox to death after Beatrice was badly stung by wasps keeping residence in the thing). “Should we say something, do you think?”

“We could.” Nicholas shrugged, placing the pillowcase covered rabbit onto the grass, searching out the small bones of its skull with his thick fingers. Joanna shifted her weight from one foot to the other, crossing her arms, uncrossing them, looking at the house and back. She thought for a minute.

“Posie, you are a great rabbit. You were a wonderful pet for our Beatrice and we’re very sorry to have to say goodbye,” Joanna said officially. She added, “Was that ridiculous? It sounded ridiculous.”

“No, no it was nice,” he said, finding the hinges of the jaw, the pillowcase slipping between his fingers and the rabbit’s slick fur. It had been so long. Would he remember how to do it properly, quickly? Nicholas held the rabbit’s head firmly and tapped the back of the skull, the soft spot that went straight to the brain, with a single decisive rap. He felt something give way and let go, the hammer shaking imperceptibly in his other hand. Joanna sucked in her breath, then exhaled. Thankfully, her eyes were exactly as they had been before. A small red ink stain crept along the flowering vines of the pillowcase. Stillness. Nicholas felt his stomach turning, stood up and carried the sack back to the house, his daughter’s dead bunny curled against the bottom seam of their old linens.

Walking back to the house with Joanna’s arm tucked into his elbow, the dangling sack in his other hand, Nicholas thought about what they would tell Beatrice. He thought
about her remarkable little face, shining with tears, her strong little arms around his neck, the
smell of her damp hair behind her ears. Hullabaloo. Nothing in him was broken. He would do
this, things like this, again, a million times, for nothing more than the spray of freckles across
her face.
“Dad,” Ethan says, “I am at work.”

“Listen up, Sparky. If I’m a goner, then Wheelchair Wonder is out, too. When you get here, tell Georgia you’re here to borrow some CDs. I don’t need her skirt shifting over this.”

“I’m hanging up.”

“CDs, son. You’re here for the CDs.”

Ethan hangs up the phone. His officemate swivels around, her orange hair whirling.

“What is it this time? Terminal case of flesh-eating bacteria?” she quizzes, chewing on the end of her pen and looking at Ethan.

“Cancer.”
“That’s not very creative.”
Ethan sighs and holds out both hands, palms up.
“You can’t miss any more work, Ethan. They’ll can you,” she says in a low voice.
“Fuck,” he says to himself. He cannot proofread any billboard advertisements for the rest of the day. He can’t write any copy for the antismoking campaign, either. They asked for something jazzy. But jazz and cigarettes go together.

Ethan works as a copywriter for an advertising agency in Washington, D.C. It is a good job and he doesn’t mind working ten hours of overtime every week despite being a salaried employee. He moved from the suburbs because he prefers the city. He also prefers to put some distance between him and his father.

Ethan’s father, Terrence, is short and somewhat hairy. Ethan worries that his father’s hairiness has been genetically passed on and Ethan will never find a girlfriend if he begins to sprout back hair. Back hair is not attractive. The only real solution is waxing, something that mortifies Ethan because he would have to make appointments with young, hipster D.C. girls. Ethan spends an inordinate amount of time concerned with his body hair. This might be a method of ignoring other things.

If people ask him about his family, Ethan tells them he is the only child of divorced parents. He does not tell them that his father is remarried and is a maniacal hypochondriac with a flair for being a real cocksucker. He tells them that his father is a Vietnam Vet. Also, he does not tell them that he severely paralyzed his step-sister, Sara. Once you tell people something like that, they respond with two things: (1) I’m sorry to hear that; and (2) What happened? People ask in different ways but the questions are always the same. It doesn’t matter if or how the questions are asked, anyway; they hang in the air above Ethan’s head, large and unwieldy like the billboard advertisements he proofreads at work.

Before she was paralyzed, Sara wore short-sleeved sweaters and black go-go boots that were both strangely fashionable and cheap. They would sit on the back porch of his father’s house and Sara would try to convince Ethan to give her cigarettes. Now, Sara sits in front of a television all day.
Georgia calls every Sunday afternoon. Georgia’s evaluation of Sara’s medical condition can’t be taken seriously. She says things like, “Sara’s getting better. She’ll be walking by Christmas.” Once, she tried to put Sara on the telephone.

“Hold on,” she said mid-sentence, “Sara wants to say hello.” Ethan believed he was prepared for such a thing.

“Hey, Sara,” he said. Sara didn’t respond, so Ethan kept talking into dead air about riding the metro, his job in D.C., and eating Hot Pockets for dinner. When he heard Sara’s loud breathing and the scratching of her earring against the hard plastic of the receiver, his voice vibrated awkwardly. He panicked and hung up. The phone rang sporadically for the rest of that afternoon but Ethan never picked it up. Sara wouldn’t be walking by Christmas. Any Christmas.

Terrence believes alcohol is the only way to ward off disease and illness (excluding those of the mind). Terrence also believes he is constantly warding off death. He likes to remind his family about this often. He knows doctors used to prescribe liquor for certain illnesses before all of this HMO crap got started. When he gets sick, he drinks brandy. If people question this, he says, “Hair of the dog, my friend. Hair of the dog.”

Terrence refers to Ethan as a “fancy-schmancy copywriter.” He knows Ethan lives in a studio apartment in Washington, D.C., for which he pays nine-hundred-and-seventy-five dollars every month. The nine seventy-five covers all of his utilities. It is a screaming deal. When Ethan catches a cold, he takes NyQuil. In the opinion of his father, Ethan is a real pussy.

Ethan has moved to the city and added twenty-five minutes to his daily commute. Terrence knows damn well that his son moved to the city to get away from his family and to be closer to trendy bars, and he understands the guilt. Plus, there are only so many nice tits in suburbia. Sometimes, you have to redraw the parameters if you want to find ’em alive. If the kid wants to look at tits, let him look in D.C. Who the hell is Terrence, anyway?

Terrence likes to spend his evenings drunk. Well, not drunk, but drinking to the point of nearly drunk. He never makes it to all-the-way drunk. He owns a produce company. This is good because Terrence couldn’t keep a job if he had to work for someone else. This is bad because there is a Texan Republican in office. Gasoline prices are going to finally bring the sweet song of death and end his misery. If he has only six months to live, Terrence has a
plan. He’s going to kill his retarded step-daughter. Clarification: Sara is not retarded. She was in a car accident last year and is confined to a wheelchair. Her muscles have atrophied and she shits her pants. Not pants, diapers. She shits her diapers.

His second wife, Georgia, is missing three fingers (accident). She is objectively beautiful except for the fingers. She whispers things to him in a southern accent and he never notices that she’s removed the glass from his grip. She doesn’t care if he sells produce or marijuana for a living. Terrence is enchanted. Georgia laughs like a wet dream and Terrence loves her for it. He does not love Georgia enough to help her change her daughter’s shitty diapers, though. That is one thing for which you can count him out.

“Count me out,” he says, and pours himself a brandy.

The car accident occurred at Christmastime last year. Sara wore a fuzzy angora sweater: baby blue with short sleeves and a low neckline. She wrapped a black satin ribbon around her throat and tied it in a bow at the back. Her hair fell like blond feathers against her collarbones. Looking back at it now, she was a coil ready to spring.

“Why do we always have to go to The Wharf for dinner?” she asked from the back seat of the car on the way to the restaurant.

“Because it’s the only place that won’t throw my dad out after three brandies,” Ethan said.

“That’s not accurate, son. It’s the only place that won’t throw your father out after seven brandies. If you’re going to be an asshole, you’ve got to be accurate,” his father half-barked from behind the steering wheel.

“You know, if it’s seafood you’re after, Terrence, we could have gone to Sushi Den. They have great California rolls. Instead, we’re going to a place that serves deep-fried circus meat. Merry Christmas, family,” Sara said snottily.

“We are not a mere family. In case you’ve forgotten the obvious, your mother over there, she’s my second wife. We’re—what’s the fucking term these days—a blended family? That’s what we are, my little apple of some other man’s eye.”

“Terrence, please,” Georgia interrupted, placing her long, glossy fingernails on his forearm.
“It would have been better if Ethan were my half-brother. Then we could be a half-assed family,” Sara laughed, looking out the window.

“Terrence zero, Sara one,” his father said, pulling into the parking lot of the restaurant.

Terrence was many things, but he wasn’t a liar. Ethan had counted six brandies and there wasn’t a chance of his father hitting the floor. Georgia wore her Christmas dress with tiny shoulder straps and candy-apple red sequins. Her skin glowed marvelously in the cheap restaurant lighting. If he had been a taller man, Terrence would have twirled Georgia around and dipped her backward. Terrence was not a taller man. Instead, he said, “Georgia is on fire. Christ. Pizzzow.” Georgia laughed and tilted her head coquettishly. She looked at the waiter like Isn’t he a ham?

During dinner, she leaned against Terrence, feeding him deep-fried shrimp dipped in tartar sauce. Her nails traced his obviously chapped lips and playfully scratched his beard. Terrence growled and pretended to bite her fingers.

“Terrence! Stop ziss!” Georgia squealed with a fake Gabor accent, throwing her arm against her forehead dramatically and giggling.

“Oh Jesus.” Sara stared into her plate. She pushed the crunchy food into different piles then uncomfortably redivided the piles. When Georgia and Terrence started kissing at the table, Sara pulled out her compact and used it to both shield her eyes from her mother and apply glittery pink gloss from a tube onto her lips. She formed an O with her mouth. She turned to Ethan, who was staring at her, and stuck out her tongue.

“I’m going out for a cigarette,” Ethan said.

“You can smoke in here,” Terrence said, avoiding Georgia’s air-kisses long enough to get another swig of brandy from his glass and a drag from his cigarette. Her arms encircled him, strangling him with an undertow of red sequins and her soft accent.

“I’ll be outside.” Ethan stood from the table and pulled his jacket from the back of his chair.

“I’m coming.” Sara dropped her fork onto her plate and followed Ethan outside.
“Oh, come on, it’s Christmas! Chicken shits!” Terrence hollered after them. Ethan heard the two of them laughing, Georgia’s high-pitched trills and Terrence’s mocking ridicule.

Outside, the air was cold and Sara buried her face deep into her scarf. They stood on the side of the building, beneath soft holiday lights strung from the roof’s edges. Christmas music blared eerily from the loudspeakers—it assumed a crowd that had never existed at The Wharf. Staring at the few cars in the parking lot, Ethan pulled a cigarette from the pack.

“Hey. Share,” Sara ordered, holding out a mittened hand.

“You’re sixteen.”

“‘Tis the season. Come on, Ethan.” She pulled the mitten off of her hand and held her palm open at his chest. “My mother is a professional wife. All of her husbands smoked. You think I’ve never had a cigarette?”

“Your mother’s a professional wife; my dad’s a professional asshole. No cigarettes for underage girls, no matter what kind of ribbons they tie around their pretty necks,” he said, waving her hand away. Sara stared at the ground. Her delicate ears flushed. After a moment, Ethan put his cigarette out on the wall of the building. “Put your mitten back on.”

“You know, your dad isn’t that bad. He likes us, my mom and me. He loves her, you know?” Sara tried to blow smoke rings with her breath. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“Yeah, let’s throw him a party. Congratulations, you’re not a total creep,” Ethan started to snicker but then he saw Sara’s face, white and serious against the dark lot. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding. I know.”

Sara stepped closer and put her head against his shoulder. “Merry Christmas, Ethan,” she whispered. He put his arm around her small frame. Ethan responded, “Okay, okay, enough mush. Let’s go in and survey the damage.”

The dinner plates had been removed but the table was filled with empty glasses. Georgia held a dessert menu in front of the waiter, ordering chocolate cake for everyone. After the display of Georgia and Terrence hand-feeding cake to one another, Terrence handed the car keys to Ethan. “Just pull her up and roll down the windows. We’ll do this like pros,” his father said.
In the parking lot, there was a thin layer of ice on the asphalt. Georgia’s ankle bent awkwardly and the slim, high heel of her red shoe snapped like the broken neck of a bird. She tumbled backward and, with her arm locked in his, she took Terrence down with her. They both lay on the ground, shrieking with glee.

“Oh! Oh! My shoes, Terrence!” Georgia wailed between gusts of laughter. She put her head back onto the ground and closed her eyes.

“What? You want new shoes? You want new shoes. I’ll get you new shoes. Shoes like Imelda Marcos. She won’t have nothing on my Georgia.” Terrence yanked himself up and placed both of his hands on Georgia’s shoulders. He looked at Ethan, “Son! Man down! Err, woman down!”

It took both Ethan and Terrence to pull Georgia to her feet. She draped her arms around Terrence. “You’re a prince among men, Terrence. A prince. And this son of yours,” she patted Ethan’s cheek absently, “is a doll.”

“Come on, Georgia. Into the car.” Ethan managed to get her into the back seat. Sara bent into the car and leaned across Georgia to buckle her seatbelt.

“My baby, my angel,” Georgia cooed.

“Merry Christmas, mother,” Sara said sarcastically, closing the back door on Georgia then climbing into the front passenger seat.

“Merry Christmas, half-assed family!” Terrence cheered from the back seat.

There was ice on the road. The wind hummed against the car and whistled through the air vents. Sara reached over and turned on the radio.

“No Christmas carols,” Ethan warned, glancing at her sternly out of the corner of his eye. Georgia and his father were kissing in the backseat, Georgia’s body straining against the seatbelt. They snickered and whispered.

“Well, I never,” Sara said, pretending to be offended. She leaned toward the dashboard. Right then, the double yellow lines of the highway spun wildly out of Ethan’s view, were suddenly visible, then gone again. The headlights of oncoming traffic—northbound, southbound—flashed behind Sara’s head. There was a dull crunch, a scream of glass, and the car glided to a squealing stop.

“Ethan! For fuck’s sake get out of the goddamned car!” Terrence was the first to yell. He had pulled himself out of the backseat and was attempting to drag Georgia out of his
door. Ethan looked to his right and saw a mass of crushed metal. Sara was limp against the crumpled half of the car. The lapel of her winter coat was soaked in red.

“Sara. Sara.” Ethan called insistently. He heard his own voice from far off. He was stiff in his seat. The seatbelt cut across his neck and held him in place until he remembered to reach down and free himself. Terrence screamed in the background, yelling for a medic, for someone to do something about Georgia’s hand.

“Sara,” Ethan whispered. He undid her seatbelt and heard voices on the other side of the wreckage. “Sara, we’ve got to get out of here,” he said quietly. She did not move. He put his hand on her shoulder. Terrence wailed behind him and the wails became sirens. Her head lolled forward. Ethan kicked open his car door and crouched on the driver’s seat, facing her. He worked his hands beneath her arms.

“Don’t move her!” someone behind him shouted.

Ethan pulled.

That is not how Terrence remembers it. Georgia was wearing her red sequined dress, the one for which he paid out the wazoo. Worth every penny. Watching Georgia bend over in that dress makes him hard no matter how much he’s had to drink. Hard, hard. Terrence is a hairy-chested mattress thrasher but he’s got to give it to the woman: that’s tough to do to a man of his age.

Georgia wore the hard-on dress and Terrence drank like a champ. On the way home from dinner, they sat in the backseat of the car and Georgia pressed against his side, her thigh pushing into her seatbelt. Thighs like a blue-blood pony on her. Christ.

His son, who quivers every time his car approaches forty-five and is utterly incapable of handling any kind of horsepower, wrecked the car. Georgia’s hair was flung against Terrence’s face and he had the strangest reaction: he laughed. The car swirled around, everyone was silent, and Terrence laughed with strands of Georgia’s hair in his mouth. He didn’t even hear the moment of impact.

He did, however, hear Ethan wailing like a goddamned ninny that everyone should get out of the car. Terrence is 99 percent positive that it wasn’t him yelling. He was too busy pulling Georgia out of the car, which was hard to do since her dress was tangled in her seatbelt. It is for this exact reason that Terrence never wears a seatbelt. If there is a car
accident and you’re not wearing a fucking seatbelt, you’ll be thrown from the vehicle to safety.

Georgia’s right arm is badly injured. The hand is crushed and there is blood all over the place. Terrence says, “Wake up, woman! You’re Amazonian! I can’t lift you out of this car, I’m no sherpa!” When Georgia doesn’t move, Terrence smacks her a good one on the side of the face and she comes to. The blood looks straight out of a bad Vietnam movie—totally fake. There’s a shitload of it and Terrence knows that no one bleeds like this unless they’ve been shot. Who are they trying to kid?

“For fuck’s sake, Ethan, get out of the goddamned car!” Okay, so he yelled. There was a lot going on so you can’t blame him.

His Georgia is a real trooper. Once he is able to get the seatbelt off of her, he drags her out of the car. He sits her down on the street, a short distance from the wreck, and then Georgia sees her hand. Her eyes roll up into her head and it is not sexy. One of her fingers is entirely missing and two others are hanging by slick, fleshy wires. In the clumsy light of the streetlamps, Georgia’s blood looks very, very real.

Terrence yells for a medic but there isn’t anyone. He takes off his dinner jacket and wraps it around the frayed wound tightly. It reminds him of his combat days and he feels uncannily nostalgic. He sits on the ground, holding Georgia’s wound, and doesn’t move. Ethan is hunched into the driver’s seat of the car. Terrence sees the soles of his shoes sticking out of the open door, trying to negotiate something awkward and heavy. Terrence thinks: foxhole. Always something bad with a foxhole.

Off stage, someone pulls a switch and, suddenly, there are lights. Spinning, revolving, rotating lights and they flash blue-blood-red-blood-white-blood all over the pavement, all over Georgia’s arm, all over Terrence who is shaking in his wrinkled shirt, staring at his son’s shoes, thinking of the motherfucking V.C. A paramedic crouches next to Terrence and takes Georgia’s wrapped arm. He peels back the jacket from the wound and waves at the epicenter of disco lights. He follows Terrence’s gaze to Ethan and yells, “Don’t move her!”

Ethan disobeys orders, something for which he would be shot under different circumstances, and he drags Sara out of the foxhole. He comes tumbling backward with Sara, who does not move. Ever.
Ethan knows his father thinks he’s a chicken shit driver and it was only a matter of time before he crawled into a foxhole. That is Terrence’s way of saying Ethan has been living his entire life waiting for something terrible to happen. Terrence wasn’t wrong. But, to be fair, neither was Ethan.

“One day you draw the short straw and bam it’s your turn with the foxhole, kid. And there’s a dirty V.C. down that hole and it’s a battle of the triggers. Who’s faster? Whoever shoots first, that’s who.” His father often offers this type of useless advice to Ethan. Ethan prefers other things his father says, particularly: “You can never unfuck things.”

Per Terrence’s instructions, Ethan comes to the house and tells Georgia he needs to borrow a collection of John Prine CDs from his father. Ethan has managed to avoid being left alone in a room with Sara for the last year. He nods at her, he smiles at her, and Georgia says things like, “Sara’s having a good day, aren’t you baby?” while Ethan argues with his father and explains that Terrence doesn’t have kidney stones. Terrence also does not have emphysema, polyps on his colon, a particularly violent form of MS that only afflicts short, balding men, the avian flu, or a brain tumor triggered by artificial sweeteners. He does not have cancer, either.

Terrence won’t let him take the CDs unless Ethan listens to every track with him. Ethan has a cold. Terrence adds another condition of lending the CDs: Ethan must drink three shots of brandy and listen to every track with him before Terrence will be amenable.

“What is the matter with you?” Ethan asks. He is too stiff for shaking his head. Also, he is too used to his father.

“Hey. Nobody called you. Nobody called you up and asked you to come borrow my John Prine. Drink the brandy. Here, here, Angel from Montgomery. This is where it’s at,” Terrence hands a glass of liquor to Ethan and busies himself with the CD player. Either he has forgotten the phone call from this afternoon or he expects Ethan to play along. He sits down in a ratty brown recliner. Ethan sits on the very edge of Georgia’s sofa. Bonnie Raitt sings: If dreams were thunder and lightning was desire. John Prine is playing an instrument in the background. Terrence coughs loudly and looks pointedly at Ethan.

“Have you had that checked?” Ethan gives in.
“Yep,” Terrence responds, “listen to this, Christ. It’s what you’re here for.” He
hear heartache?”

Ethan listens. He hears music. He does not hear heartache. His sinuses are bothering
him.

“I go in for more tests on Thursday,” Terrence finishes his drink and pours more
brandy into the glass. “I’m chasing the big C, buddy. I’ve got one thing I need to do.”

“You don’t have cancer,” Ethan says. His sinuses are really, really bothering him.
Then, because he’s tired of having conversations like this one with his father, he adds, “Well,
you might have cancer, but they have treatments and you’ll be fine.”

“If I’m out of the game, I’m going to kill your step-sister.” Terrence says this quietly
because he doesn’t want Georgia to hear him. It might upset her.

“You’re going to kill her?” Ethan would like an explanation.

“Yes. I’m going to kill her. It will be my one act as a contributing citizen before I take
a dirt nap.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Ethan would still, even more so, like an explanation.
John Prine says something about flies in the kitchen and hearing them buzzing. Or
something. Terrence looks utterly disgusted.

“You’re not my son. Swear to God your mother opened her legs for an Italian.”

“Dad.”

“Yeah, I know. I meant a different Italian.”

“Dad.”

“What do you care? You can’t even look her in the eye anyway. Have you even paid
attention to her? You always show up for her lobster or her ravioli whatever the fuck. Do you
have any idea what her life will be like without me?”

Ethan’s eyes do not move around the room. His father is right: he can’t look Sara in
the eye. He imagines that a small ripple moved down her spine, her vertebrae like dominoes.

“I didn’t mean to. I wasn’t thinking. I thought she should be out of the car,” Ethan
says.

“What? Jesus. Georgia, Ethan. I meant Georgia. Tits like a Swede on her and a laugh
that will drive you mad. You see Georgia sitting around eating Bon-bons with her two fingers
on that bad hand? You see her living a life of luxury with that girl in the chair? It’s no kind of life and the cripple’s got to go night-night. Sometimes you’ve got to cut off the limbs to save the tree, buddy.”

Terrence’s face is red; he’s sweating a little. He’s trying to both smoke and drink but looks unsure of which he should do first. Ethan is very uncomfortable. It doesn’t matter if Terrence has cancer or not. He’s sick. He’s dying. Bonnie Raitt: To believe this is living is just a hard way to go. The CD player skips over this a bit so Raitt sounds like she’s crying. Or maybe his father is crying a little.

“You’re being ridiculous. You’re not going to die,” says Ethan, “and you’re not going to kill anyone.”

This confirms for Terrence that his son is, indeed, a pussy. The real problem began when Ethan wrecked the car. The impact of the crash caused Terrence’s cells immense trauma. They mutated on the spot and gave him cancer. He’d take his pills but there are serious contraindications.

Terrence knows that Sara is not in there. She sits and drools and shits her diapers and she is not in there. Her eyes are just like the dead stares of boys dragged out of foxholes. He knew it the moment she hit the pavement. Gone. Too late. Any mercy shot to the head was a waste of a bullet but you did it anyway. Terrence will not have Georgia taking care of a vegetable for the rest of her life. He will not. Ethan is a pussy and Georgia goes to bed at 11:00. Terrence will hold a pillow over Sara’s face. It takes a long time to suffocate someone but she has no choice but to be quiet.

He’ll do time in a county hospital, handcuffed to a familiar bedrail. Ethan will visit him. Georgia will not. She won’t understand but she’ll be free. She’ll hate him for the rest of her life but she’ll be free and he’s glad to give this to her.

Ethan is tired. It isn’t his cold, it’s his father. Ethan tries to remember Terrence running alongside a bicycle without training wheels, encouraging Ethan to commit to two wheels. Surely Terrence was there. Ethan can almost picture him.

Ethan steps out onto the back porch to smoke a cigarette. The yard is vacant and black, the air warm and heavy. The sliding-glass door opens and Georgia wheels Sara
outside. He never knows what to do with his hands and is forever shoving them into his pockets. He watches Georgia maneuver the wheelchair over the ridges of the doorway. He doesn’t make a move to help her.

“Can she sit with you a minute? It’s so stuffy in there,” Georgia says, refusing to make eye contact with Ethan in order to avoid his chance to refuse and leaving Sara on the porch next to him. The Christmas lights on the back deck only draw attention to the frozen weeds that Terrence has neglected for seasons. It isn’t Christmas but Georgia turns the lights on every night to make up for the fact that Terrence never takes them down.

“Hey,” Ethan nods.

After a long pause and several obvious attempts to speak, Sara is able to say “hi.” The word is drawn out and even the effort sounds painful. Ethan doesn’t know what to say. He looks at her neck and remembers the black ribbon. Her clavicles jut out beneath her t-shirt like the small bones of a folded wing. Ethan looks at her eyes and he’s not sure if she’s really even in there. He stares at them until they become large, shiny buttons pushed into pie crust. When he sees something—a glimmer of recognition, maybe—he is suddenly aware of himself, aware that he’s been staring at her. It’s the same feeling Ethan gets when he passes other people in wheelchairs and tries not to offend them. He’s not sure if it’s rude to make eye contact. Will they think he’s gawking? If he doesn’t make eye contact, does he make them feel invisible? Does she even remember being yanked from the car?

He wants to ask her. Instead, he waves his lit cigarette around in her direction and asks, “Want one?” Half of Sara’s face pulls up into a screwy grin; the other half remains completely limp. When she gets around to saying “yes,” the S is long and full of spit. Ethan kneels down next to her wheelchair and holds a cigarette between her lips, careful to place it on the side that is grinning. He holds his lighter against the end of the cigarette.

“Okay, suck,” he says. She pulls in air through her mouth. Her lips can’t quite close down around the cigarette. He tries not to look at her in a way that might be degrading. He wants her to see that he’s sorry, sorry he heard the paramedics yelling at him to stop but panicked anyway.

Ethan puts the cigarette in his own mouth, sucks on the end, and then holds it between her lips again. She doesn’t even really inhale. He blows against the smoke so she can get a little into her lungs. Sara looks happy. Ethan knows Terrence is delusional. He also knows
his father cannot keep calling him at work. Georgia cannot keep up with Terrence now, not with Sara.

“This kills you, you know,” Ethan says. Sara laughs hard until she starts coughing and he wonders if she’s laughing at the fact of her body or if it’s some kind of conditioned response. Ethan places his hand on her knee and holds the cigarette in her mouth with his other hand. He remembers his bicycle, the wind on his face. It had been his mother’s voice behind him, cheering. It was Terrence who watched in his pajamas on the front porch, his eyes two black discs void of or overcome with emotion.

Ethan pulls the cigarette to his own mouth then snubs it out on the deck. He should go back into the house and reason with his father. Ethan is so tired. Sara’s knees are perfectly still.