ABSTRACT

THE ANATOMY OF LOVE:
WHAT IT IS, WITH ALL THE KINDS, CAUSES, SYMPTOMS, PROGNOSTICS,
AND SEVERAL CURES OF IT.

by Kimberly Kaczorowski

This is a collection of short stories that take place in, or are influenced by events that originated at, Athens, Georgia. Several members in a group of friends fall in and out of love and mature over a period of eight years. Through the length of the manuscript with the use of animal images and long descriptions of houses and landscape I aim to alter the way characters are formed in fiction.
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WHAT IT IS, WITH ALL THE KINDS, CAUSES, SYMPTOMS, PROGNOSTICS,
AND SEVERAL CURES OF IT.

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This collection of stories is dedicated to David Commins, my family.
Feral Children: Summer, 1991

Expect what can only be considered impossible and you will be aptly rewarded in wonders: a tree covered in yellow butterflies, green ferns throbbing in your fingers like tiny pulsing hearts, and a man walking to his car straight-faced though enough’s been through his veins within an hour to kill anyone else. Think of this excursion as one long, never-ending summer from your childhood. Forget what is called schedule, what you call a series of events, the grimy way of getting up at the same time each morning, and then going through a list of shoulds. Imagine doing what you will with the day, bobbing in out of consciousness without order. You get up when you will, and go to bed when you will and the world greets you happily.

This much is known throughout town: it is a strange story. Not the falling in love part. That seems easy enough to believe. Nick was always unable to resist the temptation of easy intimacy. Nick was always one to believe that a woman, her body, her eyes, could bring him clarity, like a break in a fever.

Summer was upon Athens with all its might. The cat went missing in the night. Its absence was not noticed until later. Nick did not sleep well. At night it was too warm, his body stuck to the bedsheets and bugs hummed out his windows. Leah’s sleeping body, her white legs dangling out from the sheet, was a furnace. In the blue light of the night he could not blink away the red heat being exhaled from her mouth. When he had closed his eyes he had a terrible dream of Ellen, her smooth skin and perfect body twisted around his legs like a strong pair of eels. He moaned in his sleep, his skin erupted into goose bumps. He awoke to find Leah pulling her brown hair into a ponytail.

“You dream loudly,” she said.

“I dreamt of you,” he said. “I dreamt you left me alone.”

Leah sat on the edge of the mattress and kissed him. He ran his fingers under her blouse. Her back arched. He thought, We’re animals with nerve endings. We’re animal nerves.

The cat was gone, gone, gone. After Leah had left, he stood at the kitchen counter. A carton of eggs was open. A pan sat on the stove. He rubbed his eyes.

The neighbor’s doors opened and shut, opened and shut. It wasn’t morning, and it wasn’t afternoon either. He could see the cat wandering along the concrete on the first floor of the apartment building, twirling itself around children’s legs. He lived in a cheap one bedroom on Appleby Drive, where none of his neighbors worked, where they all had children, left their doors open instead of turning on the air conditioner. Children, determined not to be lonely, played with salamanders in the dirt, stayed close to the building. From his front window he could see nearly half a dozen of them scattered across a parking lot. They would love Cyrus, his cat. They would worship him.

Yet, his neighborhood contained even bigger distractions for a cat. This section of town spiraled around itself like a baby fern, and was surrounded by small houses with large porches, a few expensive condos with red roofs and beige sides that seemed to sweat in the heavy, white glare of the sun, and his apartment complex. A small wood, a creek and a meadow surrounded the curving streets. In short, it was the perfect place for a
cat to wander and easy enough to get out under Leah’s heels or when Nick carelessly left the door open checking for keys in his pockets.

The phone rang. He cursed at it, surprised himself with the noise, and so cursed again to enjoy it. “Fuck. Fuck you.”

He cracked a few eggs into the frying pan as he heard children move in a pack in front of his door. Nick winced and leaned down to rub his knee. The air conditioner sputtered, egg splattered from the frying pan. Everyday his knee ached more. The heat did nothing good to him.

He pulled open a cupboard and took out a pipe. He heard the children move back again, their small feet thudding against the concrete like a pack of dogs. He took a long drag and blew the smoke over his breakfast. The summer is mine, he thought. The summer is mine and no one else’s. He urged the bike shop to let him go after the students left. He had saved money. He stayed home each day in a greasy shirt, smoking pot, rubbing his cramped and bitter knee. He did not think of Ellen, her mouth. He did not think of Leah, the way her nails moved over his skin to comfort him when he could not get to sleep. The summer is mine. The summer is mine.

Were the cat there he would have been on schedule. The animal kept him busy, entertained, happy. Their daily summer routine consisted of Nick taking deep hits from his pipe on the porch, turning the air conditioner on full blast, then playing chess. Normally after Leah left for work or after Nick came home from Ellen’s, his breath still reeking of beer, the four-year-old calico, Cyrus, licked its paws as Nick studied the board.

“I bet you were expecting something nicer than a kiss goodbye.” The cat would usually say something to this affect, always too snotty.

“Quit it,” Nick would say back, “Why don’t you focus on your next move?”

It was peculiar. Even when Leah accidentally let it out when she left, Cyrus usually came back after a small jaunt about the neighborhood with an entertaining story. It was days now? It was days now.

He called Leah to see if she had seen it run off in a particular direction. Nick might have asked her this before. He couldn’t remember. He knew that he never called her during the day, respecting the long stretch of road and the number of tables that she would have to get through before her shift could be over. So when he phoned the restaurant he was shocked to hear the quiet in the background disturbed with a small, girlish laughter. When Leah got on the phone, “Yeah?” escaped her mouth.

“Is there someone with you?”

“I’m at work.”

“Yes, but who is with you?”

“Can I call you back?”

Falling in love with Lucy was easy, but that morning he met her Nick didn’t need anymore. Leah and Nick had met three months ago. Nick, with his dark glasses, black head of hair, and pale face, could easily slide to the wall at a party and get lost, but Leah had walked across the room and stood beside him, listening to the conversation and catching his eye at amusing moments to underscore that it was safe to laugh. He had liked her immediately. She was different from other girls who tried to talk to him, the ones who leaned in too close, or licked the tops of their beer bottles then arched their eyebrows at him in a dare. Leah accepted him as he was from the start. It was safe. Even when,
recently, she had begun talking of flowers at their wedding, what they would stock in the fridge when they lived together, the sound of her voice made his stomach feel warm, his shoulders loose.

But there was Ellen, too. She was in the back of his thoughts even at the party when Leah had leaned against his arm, when he could smell her skin and blessed the sturdiness of the wall. Ellen: a smile on her face, both hands pulling back her blonde hair, a red sundress.

Nick tried not to think about it. The cat was missing. He pulled on his boots and laced them. A child burped outside his door. He heard laughter. He tried not to think about it. The two women sat in the back of his mind, and when he found he wasn’t playing his guitar or watching movies, he saw the outline of one of their thighs, could feel one of their fingers run circles over his ribcage.

Nick stopped where he was, in the woods searching for Cyrus, and shook his head to rid their forms for a few minutes.

The sun hadn’t reached its peak and already the neighborhood felt weighed down by the heat.

Nick’s boots kicked up small explosions of dust as he moved through the trees and pushed the bushes from his face. It had not rained in a long time. Gnats and mosquitoes swarmed his legs, and the sweat stung his eyes. “Cat, cat, cat,” he whispered, “Cyrus, Cyrus, Cyrus.” There was no answer in the familiar, haughty voice. When he reached the creek, Nick took out a bottle of water and drank, wiped his forehead, and then tugged on his small beard.

Nothing happened on accident. After a pause, Nick began following the creek as it ran to the left. He walked some distance before he heard a voice, a girl’s voice, and laughter.

When he got to a clearing he could see into a meadow, where the creek swayed back and forth over the land, and the rest of the town stood small at the distance. Before the road, stood a small brown house with a wide porch. In its shade a girl sat, laughing and holding her small knees close to her chest. Cyrus was a few feet from her, his tail outstretched and twitching as he smelled the whiskers of a fluffy gray cat.

His cat turned toward him. The calico tail flickered. “What is it you want, old man? Really? What is it you need?”

Nick tilted his head. He considered. Even when egging him on the cat only spoke on serious matters. “To leave, I guess. Travel.”

“What?” The girl stood. She walked to the end of the porch, and cupped a hand over her eyes to see him through the glare. He realized it wasn’t a girl at all, though she was small, her shoulder length hair obscuring the sharp cheekbones, her vest hiding breasts. He saw the self-given tattoo that ran down the side of her arm, Everything is permitted, and the metal piercing in her nose and eyebrow.

Nick was shocked. He tried to speak and no noise came out. A noise like that, at something as small as two cats tickling each other with their whiskers, had come from someone like her.

He said, “My cat. He traveled.”
“He’s just meeting someone new.” She smiled at him then, leaned onto the porch railing. Her fingers gripped the railing. Her wrists were white. She balanced herself over it. “Come and say hello yourself.”

Just like that, Nick fell in love. He stumbled over himself, hand outreached, and then greedily shook her hand.

In time he would see the scar that ran vertical from her left palm, through the thick of her wrist, and up into the veins that had turned white with age.

Another section of Lucy’s red notebook:

It’s safe. You know this life is safer than any you’ve encountered before. Don’t be afraid of the cohorts, a dusty group that can climb chain-linked fences and hide in weeds searching for small coins or the perfect spot to set off a fire-cracker. The music will be loud, and there will be a lot of it. Cigarettes, too. Don’t be afraid of the food that will be eaten because there will not be much of it: garlic and hot sauce on top of chocolate and stale bread, cold pizza lifted from trash cans. There’s yams for breakfast, beets and peanut butter for lunch. Don’t think of hunger. Don’t think of need. Go swimming instead. Spend an entire day eating everything you can think of with caramel, and milk. Think of this as freedom. Go to six gas stations spread throughout the town to pocket any candy bars and taffy you can find.

He knew where she worked without her having to say anything, so it became as good a place as any to hear her voice, to look at her small wrist, to measure the length of her shoulders with his eyes. Athens was (and is) so small that Lucy could not have been unrecognizable. Nick saw her when he went with Leah to buy groceries for an at-home dinner date. Lucy worked at the local food co-op, bagging groceries, arranging organic granola boxes, and unpacking produce from stiff cardboard. This job suited her needs since it could be performed under any circumstances: after being up all night, high, while cramping. It also afforded interesting opportunities; this much is known for certain. She was allowed to take some food home, the fruit that was a little too soft and goat’s milk and tofu that was a day away from expiring. She took more than that, grabbed bread, ginger, chocolate, and all manner of vegetables. Another perk that is certain: she took long smoke breaks in the alley behind the store.

The first few times Nick came he held a pack of cigarettes out to her before Lucy had time to act surprised or scared at the sight of his body leaning against the co-op brick wall. The shape of her face moving into joy, the way the lines near her eyes tightened into a smile amused him. A small animal. A cat. Perhaps a ferret. (Nick would come to regret this comparison, but only much later when it had become entrenched in him and each time she smiled he thought of animals.) He kept carrying the cigarettes when she began to expect him because of this. By week two of knowing each other they were exchangers in everything except body fluid. All manner of secrets flowed between them, as well as handkerchiefs, pot, mushrooms, chocolate, cigarettes, lighters, and bubble gum.

“You look beat,” Nick might say, as Lucy came to the stoop behind the co-op.

“No, not bad. Not bad at all. Have some of this,” and Lucy pulled a sweet fruit, or a small, tied bag of nuts from her apron pocket.
“Those boots,” she said and pointed at his shoes as he bit into the pear. “I haven’t seen shoes built that sturdy since I lived in Maine.”

And just like that they were off; exchanges of stories, laughter, reminders to run errands. The narrow alley, with its swollen doorframe and the ripeness of cooked and rotting food coming from the back of The Grit Café, became a place where ideas began to make sense. If there were only a few more hours left in her shift he would sit on the wooden bench in front of the store until she had finished and then walk back to her house. There they might listen to music or eat cans of beets and yams. Most nights they trampled through the woods along the creek bed, always talking, talking, talking. They shared secrets no one else would have been interested in hearing. They remembered names of the other one’s childhood friends, Lucy’s long-disappeared mother and Nick’s slow bike rides through the suburban mess of Lawrenceville. It’s possible they loved with abandon in their own way. It’s certain they were friends.

Other nights when Nick got to the alley there were others waiting for her too. He was not jealous. He could not be jealous. He and Lucy had not yet kissed. Not yet.

And so others waited for her too, and he was not jealous. The feral children of the town sat near her, offering exploits of their day’s adventures swimming through the Oconee River under the bridge, or shoplifting protein bars and panty-liners from local stores. Nick noted she kept close to her own kind, those who, like her, lived in crowded houses. He noted too that these feral children were often not children at all, though they had seemed that way when he rode his bike past their bonfires or watched them slugging beers in weedy lawns of deserted houses. Their bodies were short, tattooed, dressed in rags. They ranged from fifteen to thirty, and though the more successful ones that shared a house with Lucy were likely to be older, their dirty clothes, small bodies, and reliance on bicycles obscured any real estimation of their age.

It had been impossible for Nick to talk to the feral children before meeting them in the alley where they surrounded Lucy. They would jeer, grunt, and make obscene gestures. Near Lucy they stretched their bodies against the pavement, or snapped their fingers shifting their weight and smiled. She sat on the step of the co-op’s backroom and they spread around her under the lights in the alley. Her housemates, three boys in black hoodies, shuffled nervously beside her, and brought presents of strange rocks. They left their bikes leaning against the dumpster. These three galloped through town on their bicycles and had the uncanny ability to show up in the middle of any intimate conversation that might be taking place. One would simply look up and they’d be standing in the doorway, or down the aisle at a grocery store, or across the lane in the park glaring and it’d be impossible to tell how long they’d been there. Tall, and trash-fed, the boys wore an assortment of lip-rings and had tattooed themselves out of proportion to whatever their age might be. They had no names, at least none that Nick had ever heard of, but were referred to in conversations with others by the taller, middle, or tinier Radish due to the red color of both their skin and the stains the red mud had left on all of their pants and black hoodies.

He instinctively did not trust them. They loved each other too much. Nick leaned against the co-op, rubbed his knee, and watched the Radishes who could speak to each other in the dark with nothing but the brakes of their bikes squeaking.

For Nick, these conversations between the others were good, light hearted, and savored because they made the real conversations between him and Lucy more appealing.
Someone would fart loudly. The Radishes pinched each other. A few laid on their bellies and talked of their desire for feather beds.

For Lucy, the feral children were a matter altogether different. Though Nick did not know it, on nights when he was not there to walk with her through the woods she mouthed the stories the feral children had told her that day, occasionally pausing to put herself into their body. She twisted her wrist and hit her knee. She kicked at trees like they were brick walls. She laid her stomach on the ground and ran her fingers on the dirt.

Lucy believed knowing others kept them distant. So that summer Lucy went on keeping the children distant, mimicking their gestures, knowing when they were lying. She never mimed Nick though. She felt that their conversations were enough to know him by. Her dreams confirmed this. Since meeting Nick, Lucy’s dreams had become lush landscapes of velvet, sunlight, a place where purple flowers sprouted from the scar on her left hand. When she woke, she filled a page in her red notebook with the words I’m happy. I’m well. I’m happy. I’m well.

He took it all with a grain of salt. Love was the ability to pity others. He’d been disappearing too much for Leah and Ellen to react calmly. If he was not with Lucy, trampling near the creek in the woods behind her house, or squatting in the alley behind the co-op smoking and whispering secrets before one of the Radishes appeared at the door through the shadows, Nick listened to the phone or doorbell ring in the heat of the afternoon when he was alone in his apartment. They were pitching fits that revealed their singular natures. Leah’s attentions to him doubled, resulting in sudden invitations to elaborate home-made meals, grocery shopping expeditions, and television watching. Nick has a weakness for The Price is Right, and Leah called in the early hours of morning to announce it was on, making an invitation to spend a few hours at her house unavoidably needed. Being at Leah’s house made sex impossible to avoid as well. When, in the afternoons in his own apartment, he decided to pick up the receiver, Ellen’s voice was a sensual carnival. “You haven’t forgotten me already?”

In a particularly bad mood the cat might whisper, “She’s onto us,” as his paw slid his piece along the board in an effort to win at least one game.

“No, no,” Nick said into the phone, flicking his lighter into his pipe. “Who could forget you?” And your red dress, and the smell of your hair.

And Lucy’s wrists. And Lucy’s tattoo. And Lucy’s stories.

He often yelled at her, “This is no way to abuse the phone. Have some respect,” because he liked the way that it made her laugh, he liked the sound of her voice when she answered him, “How is one supposed to respect you after all that you’ve done, Nicholas?”

“I’ve done nothing for anyone to worry about,” he would say to her.

Lucy and I haven’t kissed.

We only love each other.

We love each other. We love each other.

“I didn’t sleep in my bed for the longest time because I considered it our bed, and now when I sleep there I can not stop thinking about you,” Ellen said, her voice making the receiver of the phone hard to hold.

This certainly bothered him. In his mind any woman in pain immediately took a turn for beautiful.
Another time Ellen insisted that she was going to come to his house that instant. “You don’t know where I live,” he said, and then became excited because perhaps she did know.

“Let her come here then,” Cyrus said in a particularly fearsome mood that day. “Let’s see how she’ll feel after I get to her,” it said as its tail twitched behind its back and its eyes took on a menacing slant. The clock chimed some hour Nick couldn’t make out, and the golden seals on the wall-paper in the living room wall spun and spurned him back to chess.

“Patience, patience,” Nick said, rubbing his chin, “Also, your king is in check.”

Nick closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

And Lucy’s hair. And Lucy’s lighter. And Lucy’s eyes. Like a small animal’s. Like a small animal who knows more than I do.

“Going out,” Nick said to Cyrus. “I have to see her.”

“Have to, have to, have to,” the cat said. Cyrus smiled at him, then licked his paws, the pads of them spanning out like a fan in front of his face. “If I met a woman like that I’d want to know her before doing anything definite.”

“Know her? I know her,” Nick said from near the door. “You cannot imagine what it’s like to talk to someone you enjoy.”

The phone ran again. Nick winced. He had to leave soon otherwise -

“Talking is one thing,” Cyrus said, “But she’s always writing. Writing, writing, writing. And you don’t know what happens there.”

Your body is not your own. Think of hunger as a friend, since there’s no way around it. Spend entire days digging for food, and turn it into a game: how many trash cans you can crawl into during an hour, how many supermarkets and gas stations can be pick-pocketed from, how many friends can you make who wash dishes and will let you eat the scraps off the dirty plates. It’s this emptiness, this constant need for fulfillment, this desire, that’s the real source for any adventure that could be had.

Lucy did not call him, but that was all right. He knew where to find her. He knew she was happy to see him. By mid-August, four weeks after meeting, they no longer needed to guess or ask when it was best to meet. In the afternoons he met Lucy in the field behind her house when he needed to, when she was not working. She sat in the middle of the field where she could see the river, see part of the town, and still watch the tin roof of her house. The red notebook sat in her lap, open. She would watch him walk through the grass for awhile, wave only when he got closer. He liked her for that. It was silent when they met. The hello was in the walking.

And, of course, meeting outside to talk was better. There they could discuss, exchange secrets only they would care to know about the other. He could never invite her to his apartment of course. He did not think of asking her to go there. For Nick, there was no way to have a conversation and listen to the endless ringing, to always be afraid the doorbell might ring.

Lucy’s house was no good. No. It was the noise, the openness, the sheer heaviness of footsteps overhead, stereos competing from two different rooms, and the flapping screen door that hampered their starting to talk, to hear each other’s small exploits of the day. Sometimes a Radish might come into her room and Nick would not notice until
Lucy made a giggle, the Radish already close enough to capture a fly in his hand, or pull the sheet out from under her, or throw a flier into her lap and ask if they wanted to go to a disco dance party at the 40 Watt club.

They were friends. Yes. Nick was certain. They were friends who met outside. The woods were the only place, and they often moved from one end of the creek to another, talking, talking, talking, like small children on a large train, overwhelmed with the sights offered to them.

Some say she knew about the other women. This cannot be true. Love was not saying everything that’s on your mind. Love believed there was protection in not saying everything. There was no way to mention the phone calls without seeming to be affected, so he didn’t talk about them with Lucy as they paced the woods again and again. He didn’t mention how he was waiting for Leah to call him on his continuing to see and sleep with Ellen each time he was at Leah’s house. (Indeed, the sensuality didn’t stop at the phone! Whenever Nick went out to downtown Ellen was only too easy to find). Nick imagined standing in Leah’s house, the comfortable thickly furnished house, and there he would see the dark haired, short, and irretrievably tan Leah suddenly blushing and announcing to him without meeting his gaze, “The phone must’ve rung a lot today.” And that would be the end of it! So simple! He thought about the moment of truth, the clear justice moving ever more outward to clear the air as he walked in the creek next to Lucy.

Lucy managed to not talk to him just as much. She didn’t mention her father, the wrinkled, gray suits the man wore everyday, how whiskey first made him want to create shadow puppets, then made him put his fists through walls leaving a fine, white dust over the room. She didn’t mention her mother’s small, gray purses, or how after years after leaving her father, when her mother was remarried and had a small, infant son Lucy had gone into a gas station bathroom in Tennessee, crawled through the window, and left. She had been fourteen. Walking away still lived in her bones, came to her at night in the dreams. Stumbling through the knee-high weeds wet with dew, the cold calm of the pistol weighing down her arm. And the love lifting her eyes to the orange and yellow seeping through the pine trees like oil through paper. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

What made Lucy different than Nick is that she could not mention any of this, even to herself. In the red notebook she wrote around it, writing instructions on hitchhiking and dumpster diving without mentioning why it was necessary to know. If she did mention her family to Nick she said, “I always wanted to be a good person, be kind to everyone. My father taught me that.”

“It’s not just that we learn things, it’s that we know them. Deep inside. We can become anything we’d like to be,” Nick’s face beamed at her one day when they rolled up their pant legs and walked through the creek to ease the pain of the heat of the day.

“I want more raisins. Did one of the Radishes tell you we made a kind of stir fry last night with canned yams, raisins, hot sauce, green beans and peanut butter? Over rice. We have rice now.” Lucy did not say, After my father’s wails, Maine’s winds, and seal barks an infant’s cries and the sounds of television, the evening news, and the fizz of freshly opened soda cans were too much to live with.

“That’s a thing. You’re wanting a thing.”

“I want more paper.” The long silence between his statement and her statement, the concentrated way of looking into the water like it had the answer was one of the reasons he loved her.
“That’s what I am talking about. We already know things. We don’t learn them. We don’t discover them by writing it down.”

Lucy rubbed the scar on her right palm.
“What do you write in there?”
“Moral order,” Lucy said. “Everybody wants something. Everyone needs something.” I need to know I can survive. I need to know I must survive.

Nick’s eyebrows arched. Needs. Yes, he knew about those. He said, “I want to be free. I want to leave everything behind. Maybe go to New York City without telling anyone. I could get a room there with a buddy of mine.” He did not say, I want you, I want you, I want you. Nick jumped through the water, thrashing his legs and spraying water.

Watching him, Lucy thought she could hear her father’s laugh, the raspy one that happened after he had been at the bar for awhile. She gripped the edge of her pants. Her heart beat in her chest: thump, thump, thump.
“You look hot,” she said. Lucy closed her eyes, the bright sun turning her lids spotted yellow and gray. “We should go in now.”

Lucy was on her second cup of water, streams of it pouring down her chin.
“You look like a water animal,” Nick said.
“A water animal.” Lucy held the bottle in front of her. She watched light reflect off the skin of it.
“A seal maybe,” Nick said. Her brown pants were wet. Though she too had pulled them up they were soaked worse than his. Around them, in the living room, were decorations the Radishes had stuck onto the orange colored walls: assorted pictures of bands, cats, stars, and newspaper clippings. The couches hung against the wall like sagging reformatory beds. In the corner like an icon, on a small table, sat a framed cartoon of a raccoon, its black eyes wide, its body surrounded by trash, its lips licking its mouth. It balanced on the edge of Lucy’s red notebook.
“Our real family,” Lucy had said, when she caught Nick staring at the photo.
“Family,” he traced his fingers on the frame, smiled. He picked it up with one hand, leaned his thighs against the table.
“She watches over us,” the tallest Radish said from the door frame. “Like a spirit guide. We live like her. Do you want to go down to the river?”

Lucy gave the Radish a playful shove. He poked her and went into the kitchen, singing to himself as he opened a can of tuna.
Nick curled some hair in front of her face. She made circles with her hands and held them in front of her eyes. A little raccoon. She grinned at the Radish.
Nick put the red notebook under his shirt, tucked it into his waistband. Needs, he thought.
“The river?” The tallest Radish stood by the doorframe. He had mixed green beans, peas, and tuna together, and ate it with his fingers, pausing now and then to suck the juice that had gone under his fingernails.
No, no, Nick didn’t want to, not with the three boys and the tribe of other children that lived in the woods under the bridge where the creek became wide, fat, and deep, but Nick and Lucy did anyway. He could be there only at a distance. Nick believed when he came too close to them a preternatural silence suddenly held their bodies stiff. He sat on
the slant of the meadow’s hill and watched their bickers over small drops of alcohol and over numbers of cigarettes left in packs on top of dirty, rumpled clothing on the bank. His cat would have applauded the distance. Cyrus would have said it was only polite when people made such animals of themselves.

“You smoked one of mine.”
“No.”
“Yes. I lifted that pack from Publix when they left those cases unlocked. Camel Wides. You’re smoking one!”

Nick fingered the notebook under his shirt. He was happy. He could feel the spine, the edges of it pinching against the skin between his hips. He closed his eyes and imagined Lucy there, biting him, lightly. He opened them again. A naked girl with dreadlocked hair picked up a piece of a watermelon, and kneeled near the bank to gnaw on it. Someone else threw water on her, and she threw what was left of the rind toward him. Nick’s knee ached remorselessly.

Every once and awhile Lucy carried a bottle of whiskey or wine over to him, and offered it, patting the top of his head and smiling at him before returning back to the river. She did that again and again, everyone getting drunker at the bed of the river, the lights off the distant town shimmering in front of Nick’s eye illuminating for brief seconds crowns, horns, tails, and other beastly and royal things on the feral children in front of him.

At some point Nick realized I am drunk. It happened quickly. He was rolling grass in his fingers and it came to him. I am drunk. Nick struggled to stand. He wanted to find his way back to his apartment, his cat. He wanted to read the notebook to Cyrus to hear what he would have to say about it now. Lucy came toward him, only a muscle shirt and underwear on, her short hair damp. It was only early evening, the sun illuminated the meadow in deep orange. Purple loomed at the horizon.

Nick leaned toward her, kissed her lightly on the mouth, then jerked his head back. He started up the hill grunted and trying to not put too much weight on his knee. Near the top he looked back. Lucy stood where she had been, where the sand met the grass in a long line of thick mud, too shocked to move. Her arms hung limply at her sides, her legs were askance, and jaw open enough for him to see the small, circular dark hole of her insides. Like an animal. A raccoon. A cat. A small ferret.

That night she dreamed of her father, a man she hadn’t seen in over ten years, coming to the side of her bed. He slipped his thick, oiled hands under the cover and rubbed the top of her thighs in rough, large circles. He spoke in animal noises, and in the dream it made sense to her. She could feel fur rising out of her face, her cheeks.

In the morning she searched for her notebook. She wanted to write down something about happiness, about being well. She wanted to write down where small berries grew by the side of the river. She didn’t see it. Instead, she sat on the edge of her mattress, put her head in her hands, and there was no way to get around the noise of the dream, the feel of fur on her body.

I am what I am, she thought. I am what I was born to be. There is no escape. Why am I still hiding from him?

Show mercy. Move in groups. Don’t be afraid. Do whatever you have to if you find something you need that is not readily available. Only swim naked. It doesn’t matter who
you’re with or where you are. Shyness is for people who can afford to live comfortably. There’s a lake at the edge of town, there’s also a neighborhood pool, one that sits in a cul-de-sac of neutral colored condos a few blocks from your house. You can take a short cut through the trees. Always bring friends, everywhere. The loneliness will give you too much time to think, it will attract attention. Someone might yell at a single body floating in their pool, might hurl beer bottles and insults at you from their car when they pass your single bicycle paddling through the road, but the lot of you, all stiff faced, trying wheelies and yelling at each other across the two lanes of road, is enough to make any normal person cringe and sit quietly hoping not to be seen.

It’s better to sick with other feral children, the ones whose smiles twist to funny stories, who keep a pouch of tobacco in their back pocket, and assume that you will be riding a bike over. These ones disappear and reappear, differently, with each season. They expect the same out of you: talk, drink, smoke, dance, laugh. Don’t get them distracted enough to think on where they are from, who they haven’t talked to in a long time. They believe in only one higher power, one set of morality: the road. They can’t understand things like marriage, children, career. They want the same things you want: fun, dances, bikes, sugar, swimming.

“This really is no way to behave,” Nick muttered into the phone again, clinking a spatula against the frying pan. From the dark of the apartment he could see the light shudder through the trees, spread itself across the cream colored carpet in thick, obtuse diamonds. “How’s your kitty?” Ellen said from the other end of the line.

“When do I see you again?” Nick had no desire to admit to the cat’s peevish mood, the way the animal had been sitting near the rear of the house watching the clouds move in for the whole of the afternoon. “You’re in trouble,” the cat had told him, a smile forming on its lips. “Pay attention. She thinks you’re someone else. She thinks she knows who she is. You’re in trouble.” Admitting anything to Ellen’s strange voice that already knew him too well wasn’t for him.


Something popped in the oiled pan. The potatoes and eggs smelled like brown earth. Everything was wrong on the pan in front of him: edges turning black, the center still yellow mush, and the pan itself too big for the burner. Thunder rumbled outside. On the other end of the counter sat the red notebook, open. Its pages danced in the breeze. Nick smelled the heat wafting off the black top parking lot.

He didn’t understand the book. He didn’t understand the book. Even he knew that much.

“But perhaps that’s just me. And perhaps you’ve got more friends than you’d like to admit.” More hysterical giggling, like a short note on a trumpet.

The phone went dead.

He thought of Leah, pushing sponges over tables to clear the last few crumbs off before the next customer comes in, and her voice the night before chiding him for not wanting to go to the bar with her and a few friends he’d known since childhood. “What’s come over you?” She gave a menacing smile from the doorway, then showed her teeth while pronouncing her curse: “You’ve become an old man.”
It rained through the night, the next day, then the day after that. When it rained the cat became moody, refused to play chess, sat by the screen door and looked at the outside world. Leah, too, stayed close. She went to her house right after work and sat in the recliner reading travel magazines. She called Nick to talk about different places: Romania and Madagascar. Now and then Nick closed his eyes to imagine being somewhere else, but each time he found himself alone, in a city, the fumes of a bus floating over to him like dark clouds as the lights flicker in a wild, Technicolor swirl above him.

It kept raining. The pitter-patter of water white noise on the roof sent the cat into a rabid concern over hearing loss. Cyrus begged Nick to scour the internet looking for clues about hearing safely when certain background frequencies are amplified. The dark cleanliness of everyday objects saturated Nick’s peripheral vision and made him too sleepy to argue.

A few stores flooded downtown. First, a noodle restaurant. The white tablecloths floated in the water like diseased, translucent water lilies. A bookstore flooded as well, the skinny pages of the books crinkling like old men, some of their corpses bobbing up and down in the cold, grimy water.

Lucy called him one night to ask if he wanted to walk through the town. Nick was so surprised to hear her voice on the other end of the phone he tried to sit down, and ended up on the floor, cradling the phone against his ear.

“I can’t sit still,” she said. Not, There is no hiding from who I am.

She’d always been drawn to scenes of destruction and potential pillage, and the rumors of Vienna-esque flooded alleyways and the constant wail of sirens only aroused a morbid curiosity in her. Her house itself, though on a hill like all the others in that side of town, was nearly water-logged itself with half-soaked, chilled, and feverish feral children. The water drove an entire group of them from their campsite near the creek, and the traveling housemate had returned bearing a carload of strangers. Every nook and cool, dark bit of floor space had been taken and though it seemed incomprehensible more children came out of the woods hourly, pushing bikes through the mud and lugging large backpacks and overstuffed trash bags, weak flashlights leading their way.

When Nick got to her front porch all of them were piled into the living room on all sorts of plaid and floral couches and loveseats that had been hauled from the dumpster, drinking cheap beer and whiskey straight from the bottle and singing pop songs off key while slapping each other on the back and guffawing whimsically. Nick dressed in boots and carried a small black umbrella over him while Lucy wore sneakers, pulled her pants legs above her knee, and wrapped herself in a yellow rain jacket. The first few blocks were relatively dry, meaning only that the water rushed by them in loud currents, and the rain fell on them in a gentle, slipping arches. All down Georgia Avenue, even onto Oconee and over the bridge across the river they made it safely. Then the hissing started.

Everything looked dirty, angry: the trees were too brown, and the water rushed forward in an angry growl, and the sky was an infinite gray. The light from windows they passed was a dangerous taunt. The people they saw in the houses looked bored, and all seemed to be sighing and leaning against their furniture staring at walls, televisions, or calendars. A soaked black retriever followed them after the bridge and into the town whining, with its tail between its legs. When Lucy got closer to it she saw through the
rain a red wound on its back hip festering and it barked so loud its legs became unsteady and it ran twenty feet behind them before it started to whine again.

They walked through the main part of the town, where the streets lined in careful grids, at times wading through large, rough pools of water that had strangled the town into silence. They were seen and they saw. There were a few people moving through the town, pushing their bodies near buildings in an attempt to save themselves, most of them regulars who made it to the bar even in ice storms. Nick and Lucy passed an open door, the inside walls painted red, the smell of beer and French fries coming toward them and saw two people dressed in black, wet to the bone, holding each other as the music played over their heads.

All silence. What could be said that would add to what they saw? They turned and walked back down West Hancock in further silence, staring into large windows. They stopped near the statue at the end of Thomas, white marble glowing through the gray, one hand on her shoulder, a gentle dress falling around her knees, the once white and orange tulips surrounding her beaten close to the ground by the torrent of rain, only their green stalks surviving through the mud that still hid the red dirt underneath it. Athena gave a coy smile from marble, a blessing, a curse.

Nick said, “I know that you’re scared but we’re free,” and Lucy said, “Huh,” like she was considering the options.

“We have each other now,” Nick said. He touched her left arm, unsure about where to put the rest of his body. Anyone who has kissed wrongly and wanted to kiss again might know the way his fingers laced around her coat, a lock of the jaw. Yes, this. I want this. And then he released her.

Lucy rubbed her right hand on her left palm, began rubbing, scratching, grunting with the effort because it burned and stung and itched.

It began to turn bright red, the top layer of skin a clear, translucent veil over the growing, throbbing red liquid beneath.

Nick held his jaw with his fingers. If she looked like an animal before she was an animal now. She made noises he had never heard before. Half laughing, half howling, she scratched, then bit into her hand.

“I only wanted you,” he said. “I only wanted to know who you are.”

She growled at him. “I am what I am,” she said. Some blood ran down her jaw. She said, “I’ve never liked you. I don’t even like myself.”

He moved toward her, arms outstretched, like within his grip she might become tame.

She laughed, a loud, short bark of a noise. The water flew away from her face like a bubble. “The only thing charming about you is your knee. Your bones aren’t worth pity.”

Lucy turned her back to him, gnawed on her wrist with her lower jaw. The rain picked up, flattened Nick’s hair to the base of his skull, and the blood trickled around Lucy’s chin, its maroon color glowing through the gray. The gun blossomed barrel first, and Lucy laughed like a cough when she held the butt of it in her open palm, the blood curling onto the metal like ivy. Tobacco. Whiskey. That powder gray suit. Hands that used to create animals on the wall during the long Maine winters. Papa. Of course. I won’t forget you We’re the same people. I know who I belong to, what I’m supposed to do.
Thunder overhead, then lightning somewhere near Boulevard. Nick looked into the sky, the heart of the storm above

It was mad. The shock of the morning entered the house. There were bodies everywhere, chips staling on the coffee table, ashes, empty bottles, and all sorts of toys: water guns, books, chalk, cigarettes; it’s how they always spent their days and nights. Morning and already the bugs were doing a steady chirp outside the window, the green leaves on the trees shading the house were still, looked like large waterfalls. From the porch the children saw down to the swollen creek, and from the front they looked directly into the neighborhood swimming pool. There was no Lucy, and though they trampled through the mud down to the river and back up again calling and calling her name she didn’t answer.

And there was Leah on the front porch of the house she shared on Grady Street, one hand around her middle, the other shading her squinting eyes as they searched the distance and finally landed on Nick trudging up the sidewalk, his shirt and pants still soaked.

He stopped twenty feet from her porch. His jaw opened and he gaped like a rattlesnake, bobbing his neck, his hands limp beside him. He nearly tripped as he began to run away from her, recovered, and could only hear the thumping of his wet shoes against the sidewalk. His clothes let off a spray of water in his stead, and in his mind he heard leave, leave, leave, leave, leave.

She knew, then, though she could not tell him, There’s no getting away from who we are.
The easy part for Joni was telling Ethan that Naomi got evicted. She disliked telling him anything, part of her preferring he wasn’t there, another upbraiding herself for wanting to leave the man everyone thought she loved, all of her needing to ignore him. They were in the kitchen, where most of their intimacies took place since they had started sleeping in separate rooms (Ethan in what was their bedroom, and Joni in the almost-nursery), and Ethan’s tall frame filled the doorway. His palms hit the archway, and his eyebrows were pointed up, his chin tilted, a quizzical expression. Joni spoke near the sink, her belly bulging in front of her, her head turned to the small model horses that stood on top of the windowsill that looked out into the yard. She had a collection of the models spread over the entire house, and they brought her comfort at moments like this. And here is their nose. And these are their eyes. Ethan’s head tipped forward, his mouth fallen in rapt attention as he listened to Joni, but then he began to roll his head from side to side and clap his hands, snickering in his own, awkward fashion.

He didn’t laugh loudly though, he didn’t stomp his feet, and clasp Joni around her fat, pregnant belly. Naomi’s eviction was expected. It was a strange series of events: Naomi fought with her by-then ex-boyfriend, Tim, the ex-boyfriend complained to a bartender who wanted to see him in bed instead of only at the bar. He sought her comfort through pity. Everyone in town knew Mary Anne, the bartender who worked in the cheap red roomed bar on Clayton Street, was nothing if not assertive. Some said she pushed you into a corner offering a beer in one hand and a peace treaty in the other, and others said she just knew her own mind. Either way, Mary Anne made sure whenever Naomi’s landlord was there to pour each beer while her mouth ran full of poison. Some people in town said that the landlord evicted Naomi because he wanted to drink in peace.

In any case, the eviction was inevitable. Telling that part of it to Ethan was easy. Ethan, the tall, awkward boy Joni had been dating for nearly two years, never really liked Naomi and therefore enjoyed hearing of her misery. He said, “I knew it. I knew it.” He clapped his hands. Joni watched him. She saw the way his eyes creased. She put a hand on her stomach. She even smiled.

It was in front of the television that Joni decided to tell Ethan the hard part of it; she had already agreed Naomi could move in with them. She stood above him, watching his bowl-cut head, and crooked nose sneer at the television each time someone went over on The Price is Right. “That’s how they manage to rip us off,” he spooked to her without turning. “We’re always overvaluing things.”

The first thing he said was, “God bless you. We’re all Gods children, aren’t we?” He nodded at her, his face twisted into a grimace. She grunted, put her hand on the couch to balance herself.

It was a long fight, at least by Ethan’s standards, but not any worse than the ones they were used to having. It was lengthened because at first he refused to leave the television, talking to the area above her head each time the commercial break went on. He argued that at five months pregnant they needed to be alone to prepare for the baby. He went into great detail: the diapers they still needed, the shoes, the toys, and there was still a mattress to buy.

She thought, It hasn’t even moved yet. Not a kick or a twirl. Nothing.
He said Naomi should ask someone else. Joni shook her head the entire time. No, no, no. There was no way to say no to Naomi, though it was true that Naomi wasn’t a likeable person. She was the type of girl that would invoke a desire to slap and then kiss. With her shabby clothes, tangled hair and delicate wrists she got a guilty pity. It was dreadful to hate her since she made gifts out of her failed hobbies: half finished scarves, dripping, tipsy candles, and strangely non-waterproof glasses.

He said, “But she doesn’t even like the music I play.”
“Naomi likes the guitar just fine.”
“Not that music. My band! She doesn’t even like my band.” He swayed back and forth. Joni watched his stomach. It hung in front of him like a small pouch, and it was a recent phenomenon. She imagined the stretch marks through his hips and thighs that would form as it grew larger in the next five years.

“She went to the coffee shop one time. She brought you those flowers. Petunias.”
“They gave me hives.”
“You can’t expect people to know what you want all the time.”
“I expect them to care enough to notice. I expect you…”

Ethan kicked the couch. He pushed the recliner. It swayed back and forth. From where she stood Joni could hear the refrigerator door open and close. She knew he was picking out a cheap bottle of beer. He pushed his way out the front screen door, swinging his fists as he walked, kicking at the bushes that grew along the edge of their yard and separated them from the street. There was no physical danger; Ethan hadn’t driven in years. He would walk the streets holding a paper bag until he found someone to play music with, or he would drop in on his employees unannounced and demand they reweigh every bag of pre-ground coffee.

Joni stood at the window watching Ethan sway down the block until he was gone. Naomi. Their friendship’s sustenance was in reminding the other of imminent self-destruction. Until now, they were friends who shared the same mistakes. Having dropped out of the University of Georgia within a few semesters of each other, they had met on Thursday evenings to drink a few beers and talk. They were friends who turned to the other one to be reminded that they were doing everything wrong. That menial job shouldn’t be worth anything to you. You’re better than that.

When Naomi got evicted, Joni knew she had to move in with Joni and her boyfriend, into their beautiful two-story house. There was no way to get out of it. There was no one else to remind Joni of all her recent mistakes. There was no one else who knew her secret. I have to get out of here, Joni thought to herself, turning away from the lace of the curtain.

Then, she rubbed her belly, shook it. “I love your father,” she said. “Really, I love him. We’re staying put.”

Naomi was a terrible packer, and an even worse cleaner. Joni found herself grunting, the sweat collecting behind her neck, her knees aching as she leaned down and scrubbed the grime on the bathtub. By the time they were done packing boxes and shooing cobwebs there was nothing left to do but take the blankets and pillows from where Naomi’s bed used to be and spread the rest of the liquor and wine bottles on the floor and lay low for awhile. “Cocksucking hot,” Naomi said as she spread her arms over her head and pushed her belly into the carpet.
The different pale blues and opaque whites of the gins, vodkas, and white wines shone so similarly to the cleaning bottles Joni found herself smiling, saying, “No, this one,” in fear that Naomi was going to pick up the wrong bottle of liquid and it would all be over. No escape to the mountains. No friend to tell her what she should be doing, get her mind straightened out in the cabin in the woods.

The air conditioner hummed above them, and Naomi sipped and both smoked and were careful not to get the ashes on the carpet they had just vacuumed.

She’ll be all right sooner or later. We’ll both be a little happier with each other, Joni reminded herself. Naomi cursed Mary Anne as she took another swig. “Busy body,” Naomi said.

“She has a bigger dick than Tim.”

Naomi chortled. “Tim wants love to be easy. He wants someone to take him away from it all.”

Joni had often considered going into the red-roomed bar where Mary Anne bartended, and trying to cool down the flush Mary Anne worked herself into every night for three weeks, every night since Naomi had received her notice to vacate. Joni could imagine herself walking in, and sitting on a stool across from Mary Anne as she worked. Then, when Mary Anne got closer, Joni would nod at her, grab her stomach, and lean into the bar to get Mary Anne’s attention. They would spend a few minutes, nodding their heads close to each other like horses, before Joni would stand, awkwardly throwing her weight into her back, and leave. Mary Anne would smile after her. Joni, the one everyone trusts, the good one.

This never happened. Joni could never bring herself to go into the bar. For two months Joel had been following her, a dazed look in his eyes as though he might have remembered who she was, as though he had a faint realization of who they were in high school. At times he stumbled unto his knees and proposed to her, at other times he followed her around, mumbling under his breath that families were made to protect the future. Upon seeing her walk into the bar, he might be driven to make a scene, a big one, over the unborn baby. Everyone would see him scream, rant, and cry. It would ruin her. Joni had done her best to hide from him. She dodged alleys where he was known to proselytize, tried to go out in the morning or early afternoons. She was afraid each time he made any faint commotion that people would look at her face, eyes wide and cheeks reddening and guess her secret. She loved him. She felt it in her fingers. She loved Joel, but she was supposed to love Ethan.

Outside, the children screamed in the patio of the bakery. A woman called out to one of them “Slow down. Slow. Gentle.” The house sat so close to the patio, to Finley Street, so that, sitting on its porch, it was possible to stick a broom into someone’s pastry, or into someone’s car window. The sun pushed onto the floor through the drawn shades. Joni thought, smiling into her drifting smoke, We’ll go somewhere else. Naomi will roll her eyes at me. She’ll tell me to grow up. She’ll tell me to stop being controlled by my hormones. Cottage. Lake. Woods We will go somewhere else.

From outside they heard more laughter, and then a familiar voice. Though there was a wall separating them, and beyond that they were separated from their shared childhood by time and a head injury, at the sound of his voice Joni curled into the fetal position, resting her head on Naomi’s drunk, limp shoulder. Through the late afternoon
light the local holy fool, Joel, could be heard through the giggles of the children. “God bless you. May God have mercy on you. We’re all God’s children.”

If it had not always been her habit, her recent dreams guaranteed Joni was the first to wake. She spent each morning in a half-dazed state, standing over the kitchen counter, starting coffee, waiting to be hungry. The morning after Naomi moved into the guest bedroom was no different. Joni stumbled about the boxes, remembering what it was like when she had moved to Athens, years ago, as a teenager waiting to start the university. It was before she had met Naomi, before she had known anyone, and it was all still only her secret. Joni had been born and raised in Kennesaw, a suburb of Atlanta about two hours west of Athens. Before high school she had spent each day after school she taking care of horses and then, during high school, taking care of Joel.

Back then, only seven years ago, Joel had been a skinny teenager who wore black shirts and shore his hair too short. He had wonderful knees, and a rock collection that spread over several bookcases, his desk, and his drawers. His soft spot was talk about secrets buried under the dirt, pressures from above that form crystals and quartz. Talk like that made him smile and rock back and forth gently on his bed while the two of them smoked cigarettes and the shiny collection of stones stood on the dresser. She would listen to him, touch his knees, and kiss his thigh.

Joel would move his fingers across her face. “And here is your nose. And here are your eyes.”

Sometimes he went to the stables with her, stroked the noses of horses she rode.

“They are so soft,” he had said when one of the mares stuck her gray nose at him through the stall. He ran a few fingers over her head.

“You are surprised by glorious things.”

“By them. You know the poem? And we’re bound for that, Forever like Emily Dickinson’s horses – headed to the end. / They know the way – These Steeds – run faster than we think – it’s our own life they cross – and take with them,” he said into the nose of the mare.

“You morbid motherfucker.”

That was love. They spent each night riding a bike to one or the other’s house, lying on a mattress and talking. It was on a similar night that Joel got into his accident. He ran head first into an opening car door. The doctors said that he was in some kind of walking coma, that a part of his brain had shut down. Joel still had a scar that ran four inches at his hairline on his forehead. Since the accident, he had forgotten Joni, his parents, his rocks, and the horses. She tried to do the same. The steady collection of rocks on his dresser sprouted a layer of dust, and he dedicated himself to God, to serving youth. He lived off of Pulaski Street in a cupboard. The width of his room was wide enough to fit a single mattress in it, and it was long enough to sit a small TV in front of his bed. He owned one pair of clothes, and smelled, constantly, like sweat and urine. Most embarrassing of all to her was that he kept himself busy with his own street-style ministry and involved himself in the lives of people who smelled worse than him, who were tattooed from hairline to ankles. He stood on street corners and called “God is alive,” into oncoming traffic.

Joni had moved to Athens only a few months after Joel’s accident, after his own move. She spent the entire first month of school living near boxes at night, the whole of
her room still in cardboard, her school books plastic-wrapped on her desk, her days spent following Joel instead of going to class. She had met Naomi outside of a bar where, a few feet ahead of her, Joel was getting drunken college boys to agree to an immediate baptism if Joel used their favorite beer.

Naomi had caught Joni’s elbow and said into her ear, “Honey, he’s not yours. You understand? That one’s not yours.”

In front of everyone, Joni had wept. Later that night, after she had told Naomi everything, she agreed that she would stay away from Joel. He wouldn’t miss her.

The morning was upon her. The coffee smell filled the kitchen and Joni picked up a model horse, a mustang caught in a feral rear. She placed the plastic horse in front of her on the table, and put both hands on her stomach.

Ethan moved behind her, kissed her on the head. “Morning,” he said in a gruff voice, only his body ready to face his job.

It was late August, starting to chill at night, but not enough to completely shake off the heat of the day. Joni hugged a sweater closer to her. The morning light spread itself across the kitchen, over the scattered boxes, and onto the table, where Ethan, sat, lit his cigarette and Joni’s. The two sat drinking coffee. They left the windows open so around them they could hear their neighbor’s car doors slam, and the sound of children, laughing, on their way to school. An unknown bird sang in a tree not far away, and some other winged animal joined him.

She was lucky. They were lucky. Ethan and Joni had been inordinately lucky to land a house on the corner of Beulah and Nantahala Avenue where the trees formed a soft, green canopy that sprinkled small shards of light onto the flat, mossy-grass, and the cars moved slowly down the wide street, and the living room and porch stayed dark and cool all summer long. She had to remind herself. This was a good life. Their house was two stories, with two rooms on the second floor, and a tall-walled maze of kitchen, guest room, living room, and bathroom on the first. Joni had taken to painting the rooms different colors, starting out pale in the first floor and getting darker as she moved into the second. Joni thought of this, the beauty of the house, the dark wood under the models’ feet.

“Horses,” Joni said to Ethan, who was sucking the last of his cigarette to the filter. “I want the baby to be raised around horses.”

“Yes,” Joni said. She balanced her cigarette on the edge of her, took two hands and shook her stomach. Five months without moving on its own, but she wanted to have it agree with her this once. “I want to give it a happy childhood.”

A bang resounded through the yard, a clanking of the wire fence against itself. “What the fuck,” Ethan said, standing, crossing his arms, and walking toward the kitchen window. “He’s here,” Ethan said. “That bastard is here.”

Joel, the local holy fool, stood in the backyard, arms limp at his sides. He had gone after Joni often within the last couple of months, ever since she had started to show, but he had never come to the house. Joni doubted he could connect most people to numbered buildings unless he went there regularly, drawn by the smell of food or beer.

Ethan turned red. “God dam it, Joni,” he clapped his hands. “Get him to stay away from us.”
Joni got to the screen door off the edge of the kitchen before Ethan did. Joni came to the door, pushed her nose onto the wire mesh of the screen. The wood paneling of the door blocked her stomach. “Yes?”

“God bless you and keep you, Joni,” Joel bowed, never losing his beatific smile. “The purpose, Joel.” She wanted him to smile at her, to hold out his arms. She closed her eyes for a moment and saw his knees, the quartz crystal on the bedside table.

Joel spoke before Joni had time to open them. “He wants to see Naomi. Tim does. Before the two of you will be leaving.”

Joni skipped the How does he know when we’re leaving? She skipped asking. At this point she knew it was useless to argue. “We’ll be there, Joel.”

He bowed two more times before letting go of his shirt. His eyes grew wider, the smile larger. The sun behind him turned orange and the birds swooped into the bushes behind the rusting fence. “Bless me, Joni. Bless me.”

She made the sign of the cross, and Joel bowed once more, so deep that he could have kissed the dirt beneath him before leaving. It would be a couple more hours before Naomi got up. There was plenty to do.

“Leaving?” Whenever Ethan asked a question out of frustration, he leaned onto his tip-toes and swung his hands in front of him, as he was doing when Joni shut the door. “For the weekend,” Joni said, dumping out the cold coffee hardening at the bottom of her cup and moving toward the coffee maker.

“For the weekend?” Ethan asked again, leaning so far over that he was close to touching the floor.

Joni wanted to say, It’s all right. She wanted to add something to make him feel better. But there was no way to say it was all right and mention that at the top of the wooden stairs, where the two bedrooms stood under slanted ceilings, Ethan slept alone in what was once their bedroom, and Joni slept on a small, single mattress on the floor of what would be the nursery. There was no way to say It’s all right when she was the one who had moved into the other room.

“You don’t love me,” Ethan said.

“I’ll be back soon,” Joni faced him when her coffee was full. She took a tentative sip of it.

“We’re having a kid together. You’re going to have to try to love me.”

“You know that Naomi needs to get away for awhile,” the lie came off her tongue beautifully. “It’s what a good friend would do. Dad’s cabin isn’t being used right now.”

“You light up around that holy fool.”

Joni set her mug on the counter. “Joel.”

“And God bless you. And God loves you. Everyone is special.”

“You’re not. You’re not special. You can’t play good music. You never surprise me. You never have.”

“Joni.”

“We’re having a kid together.”

“We will work it out.”

“Just give me the week. I need it to be mine,” she said, slowly, after him.

“Take her away, then. Take Ms. Naomi far away from me. I’ll relish the time alone.”
Ethan could have been a good reason to beg into the phone to her father for the key to the cabin. He remained an unspoken one, though. No one knew, or no one mentioned their sleeping arrangements. This was one of Naomi’s gifts to her, though Naomi did mention the nightmares that she heard from Joni’s bedroom. Joni spent nights dreaming of a soft, bubbling pop of guts and bleeding glass through her bellybutton and giving birth to a baby the size of a thimble surrounded by eels. She told this to no one except Naomi. Less than a day after she moved in, the morning they were set to head toward Tugaloo Lake, Naomi crossed her arms and said “I could tell you were having strange dreams, could hear you clutching yourself and moaning from the stairwell.”

Joni was too busy after Ethan left to think much of what should happen between Ethan and her. She moved a few bags down the stairs, talking to the fetus about what they were about to see. They were headed to the Tugaloo Lake near Tallullah Falls, where Joni’s father kept a small cabin that he was devoted to in the woods of the mountains near the South Carolina border. There, as a child, she had spent summers running through the soft green of the grass, taking gentle ponies through wide trails into the forest. There, she hoped, she would start to feel better. She could remind herself that there wasn’t much time left in her pregnancy. She could tell herself one of the best things about her own childhood was the fact that her parents ate every meal together.

Joni sat on the couch with a huff and pulled a pillow into her lower back. “I want to get going soon,” she said. Naomi crouched near the record player, one leg straight. Her red underwear glowed across the gloom of the dark hardwood floor. Joni said, “We still have to see Tim.”

Naomi winced, stopped pulling records out of boxes in the living room. She was wearing a shirt only, a coffee mug near the base of the speaker, one hand still mid-scratch on her thigh.

“How’d he know we were leaving?” Joni asked.

Naomi leaned over the box again, her face buried in her work. “It’s hard to tell about these things.” Naomi said, “Fuck Tim,” and turned the speakers out to face the lawn and driveway as though she could transmit her anger toward wherever Tim might have been at that moment.

“You’re bullshit.” Joni adjusted the pillow behind her back.

Naomi smiled up at her from the floor. “What’s bullshit is you and the love of your life, how the two of you get on together. And you’re the one who’s pregnant.”

Joni sucked her breath in before realizing Naomi was talking about her and Ethan, not her and Joel. Right. We just don’t understand each other anymore. Me and Ethan.

“What’s bullshit is you. So what? Tim doesn’t love you anymore.”

Naomi stood. She said, “That’s not what you’re supposed to say.”

“I know what I’m supposed to say.”

“Tim is who’s bullshit. Tim and his attempts to bang Mary Anne.”

Joni looked into her hands.

“Don’t you believe in love anymore?” Naomi put both hands her hips. She drew herself up. “Some people belong together. You have to make commitments. You should tell me to get dressed, look beautiful when I see him.”

“I’m in no hurry,” Joni said. “But you should wear that pink shade of lipstick you just got.”
By ten it was clear the morning was ruined. They would not be able to leave until the afternoon. Having turned the speakers to face the porch, Naomi stood behind the screen door to hide from cars that passed by the house in a long white shirt bopping her head, her hands in fists, the bass heard from near the driveway. Joni stayed on the couch, both hands on her stomach, shaking then rocking it, then pushing two fingers into her skin sharply. Naomi and Joni stared at each other across the room, each knowing what the other was thinking.

Getting from one point to another required a litany of further fables and putrid promises. Do you like this dress? You can wear it since I can’t fit into it right now. You look good. Real good. They piled their things high into the back of Joni’s car without suitcases or order, then drove across town. There, Naomi huffed, and threw herself out of the car. She was walking away before Joni opened her door.

“I’ll just be a minute,” Naomi said, throwing the keys into her purse and walking toward the beige house. Tim’s figure stood near the door. He wore a white shirt, his blonde hair looked damp, just showered.

Joni waited, had a cigarette and leaned against the car. The sky around her turned orange, and students in shorts and sandals talked in steady tones as they moved by her. No one she knew. Most people who lived in Athens stayed clear of the campus, preferring to leave the tall trees and criss-crossed pathways to students and professors while the townspeople hogged the bars, found out secrets about each other in diners, movie theaters, and music venues. Tim still lived less than a block from campus, in Little Five Points, because he claimed he hated moving. (Naomi had said he fantasized about going back to finish his degree.) Joni hadn’t been that close to the brick buildings since she was barely out of high school.

“You,” a man’s voice said.

She turned, banged her hip into the side of the car door. Joel stood before her, some bright crumbs stuck in his beard, small holes in his dark plaid shirt. Beneath the sun he looked near biblical, one hand stroking his protruding jaw line, the other gripping a bible close to his thigh. “I recognize you.”

“I wish you would.”

“You’re not married.”

Joni’s brow wrinkled.

“Every child deserves a family. It’s what God wants.”

Joni inhaled again before throwing her stub toward the drain.

Joel dropped his book into the wet grass and took her hand, a smile forming in his eyes out of kindness. “I love you, God loves you, we must think of the child. Marry me.”

She kissed him on the mouth. It happened quick. She was surprised that she was still able to move fast. She simply slammed into him and took his head in her hands. He didn’t move, pull back, or stop her. She tried part his lips. She wrapped her arms around him. She kissed him again, harder, bit him on the lip.

He stood in front of her, his arms limp at his side.

She looked at him, their faces a few inches apart. She pinched the back of his neck, hard. She said, “I love you.”

He smiled at her. He said, “Everyone has to love something bigger than themselves.”
She stood back. She said, “We were so happy once.”
“Now we have the child to think of.”
“It’s mine,” she said.
He shook his head. “Nothing is ours, even our past.”
“You think you’re so clever.”
“I am humble before God and His creations.”
“I love you.”
“God loves us. That’s why we never have what we think we want.”
“It’s mine,” she said, her arms touching her stomach. “It’s mine. And you’re not.”
When she turned around she saw Naomi holding the screen door open and shaking her head.

Naomi came out of the house with a slam of the screen door, abominably agitated. “I don’t want to stay locked up in a house panting after him like a lost dog,” Naomi said, and she was quite adamant, stomping her foot one very other word. “He doesn’t even love. He doesn’t love me anymore. He doesn’t know what love is, what commitment is.”
Joni pulled her door open. Joel was long gone.
She didn’t say anything about the kiss. Naomi berated Tim’s couch, his fingernails, the tile in his kitchen. She shook her head as she drove.

They left town in the late evening under an apocalyptic sky. By the time they were further into the mountains it was getting darker and the surrounding tall pine trees looked brown and blue like a thick bruise, and the dry needles left after the mild summer rustled next to each other. Joni sat in the passenger seat, pushed it far back, and stared out the window. The car moving beneath her felt like a ship, and soon she was seeing the child squirm in Joel’s arms. On each side of their ship was a large, churning river, and in the distance a domed temple burning white under the sun, and a grunted chanting.

*Ours,* she said.
*We never have what we think we want,* he said.
She looked into the child’s face and saw it was elongated, its nostrils flaring, its head dark and ears long. The foal-child chortled at her, and threw back its head.
And when she opened her eyes the car had stopped and was in the middle of the pasture. The smell. Oh. The smell. Childhood.
It was still somewhat light outside. The horizon was bright orange, and the world was past shadows. Horses, a group of them, stood near the car, and when Joni walked between them they shoved their velvet noses over her fingers and forearm and huffed hot air. She saw Naomi’s skinny legs circling between them, running her hand along their shoulders all the way down their backs. They were brown, some with black hair, and a few were gray with small white freckles over their coats, and their field was wide, the land moving in gentle waves, the grass green and the trees in the distance starting to turn light yellow, an early fall. A breeze picked up.

“You’re in love with someone else,” Naomi said. “You have to give it a shot with Ethan.”
Joni patted one of the gray ones, felt its skin flinch under her fingers.
“If someone loves you, I mean really loves you, you can’t just cut them out. You have to give it a shot.”
Joni ran her finger along the high forehead of one darkly brown mare. She said, “They’re ugly animals.”

“He loves you.” Naomi stomped her feet. “He loved me.”

Joni slapped the mare on its hindquarters. It turned to look at her. “They have brains the size of walnuts.”

“They’re happy. In their own way.”

“I’m calling Ethan when we get to the cabin.” She curled her fingers in the mare’s main. “You will help me move out.”

“It’s over.”

“It’s over,” Naomi said after her, softly.

Then it turned. In her middle the entrails moved, tangled over the small body like maroon wings, and she thought, And here is her nose, and these are her eyes.

Joni hit the horse again, and clucked. The mare looked at her, and shied away, walking a few paces with its ears turned back. “Such stupid animals,” she said, and clapped her hands, clucking louder. The group of horses trotted away, leaving the two women alone in twilight.
Late into the fight Sam says, “Let’s go to bed. Let’s sleep it off.” He stands in the kitchen. Lucy stands near the futon mattress. Her clothes are strewn about the room. His cheeks hurt from crying. She kicks the bed a few more times. She says, “It happened. Look at me and tell me that you know it happened.” “Let’s just go to bed.” “You’re glad. Just tell me that you’re happy about it. I love him. I do.” “We should try to sleep.”

In bed their legs intertwine and they whisper secrets to each other and he feels most like himself. It’s mid-November, Lucy’s been staying with him for three months, and it’s this ritual that reminds him they’re still human. Samuel has spent his entire life in the city, but it’s her outline in the dark that makes him feel at home, finally. Her body is sharp, and jagged. While they talk he slides his hands over her bony hips, feels the intricacies of her spine with his fingers. In the dark he knows her better than in the light when she moves about gracefully with a fully painted face and doesn’t appear so small and sharp. Here, Sam says, “Tell me about yourself.” And after she is done speaking without answering the question he can say, “No, tell me more.”

In bed, Lucy thinks, And there is a knife in the kitchen counter, to your left, maybe three steps. And there’s the pack of dollars bills you’ve hidden under the end of the mattress. And there’s his wallet, pocket on the right side, in his pants piled at the end of the bed. He will never forgive me for showing him what he really is.

It’s getting colder, and it doesn’t please his imagination to picture her still sleeping on the couch of the Metal House, music and parties going on around her, the coffee table littered with anything anyone can need to leave their body: needles, pipes, powders, cigarettes, lighters, whiskey, and so on. Or worse: her constant cleaning and improving having banished the other residents into a room where they plot to send her into the cold night. The orphans claimed Lucy had come off of the road miraculously looking cleaner than most, wearing a jean skirt over unshaved legs, her cropped hair too short to be as knotted as the rest of her companions. They saw the fresh scar on her left palm, red and sore-looking, and her tattoo Everything is permitted. It was their first signal that she had a motive, that she wanted something. Sam thinks now, as she sighs beside him in the dark, hopefully falling asleep (And there is a can of beans in the cabinet. The cabinet to the right over the sink. And the bus stop is three blocks, away from the bay) he must have seen her a few times before she came to his studio, the glow from her lighter moving to her cigarettes illuminating her cropped brown hair and sharp cheekbones on the nights he showed up at the house bearing gifts of whiskey and Advil to the travelers.

Samuel, with his thirty-two-year-old thin body and balding red head, was known as the one person who showed up nightly bearing enough cigarettes, trash bags, and tortilla chips to be useful. He carried band-aids and Tylenol in his bag, always had good advice for everyone. Out of gratefulness and in return the orphans, who were simultaneously known for being personally reclusive while maintaining a communal eye that moved over the entire town from dumpsters, alleyways, and stoops, would tell him bits of information they gathered.

Yes, he doesn’t remember the first time he saw Lucy. He wasn’t good with women. He had been in few serious relationships, though Todd had even less. Sam
tended to ignore women younger than him, and he expected to be ignored by them. He knew later the orphans (Todd, his best friend, and Sophie, Billy, Jean and John) had long believed they’d be good for each other despite the ten year, eleven month, and nine day difference. Lucy came into the Metal House acting out of a malevolent maternity as malignant as the traveler’s small sleeping pads littered about the house’s hardwood floors. Lucy cleaned out their kitchen, a tough task considering the mildewed bread, rotting potatoes, perpetually sticky floor, and half empty bottles of beer. She had braided Sophie’s hair one night before Sophie’s work, accidentally moving her hands so tight Sophie got a headache, and had made the entire house, travelers included, dinner three nights in a row. There was so much that left-overs provided lunch the next day to anyone who wanted any. 

Everyone eyed the food on their plates and in the plastic, cracked tubs suspiciously.

The Metal House was a place of refuge. The orphans who lived there ran it like an old charity home for beggars. The town was overrun with orphan travelers just passing through. They seemed to come out of the sea. Portland, Maine, their town, was too cold, even in the summer, and too expensive, but they come anyway, by bus and car and train and when they got there, on top of the world, they sat along the street with their heads in their hands wondering what to do next, as though they weren’t expecting to be stopped by the miles and miles of wilderness surrounding the area, as though they weren’t aware there was always an end to the road. The travelers never stayed long. They regrouped and headed west toward Vermont or down south, far, far south to Georgia, always following their own morality: see everything and leave quickly. When they got to the Metal House, if they managed to, the travelers spoke of other orphans who sent them. Jim said you were nice to him. Sara said she got to sleep on your couch for a week.

The Metal House orphans helped the travelers survive while they were in town. To compensate for the overpriced basic goods they tended toward the inedible – stale donuts and pizza kept cold by the ice surrounding the dumpsters. They drank coffee with solidified cream floating near the corners, saying it just takes a good circling of a spoon to get rid of it. They were friends with everyone who worked behind the counters. Todd put soft fruits and stale marked to be thrown out in a special trash bag that he left near the dump, but not in it. Sophie piled all the half-eaten leftovers from the tables she waited on in the diner and took it all home in a paper sack. Still, with all the emphasis on eating whatever they could, the look on Lucy’s face when she watched them eat made the orphans and the travelers eat slowly, stare at their food before they put it in their mouth as though they expected a piece of glass or a discolored bit to indicate poison.

They knew she had a plan. The orphans each knew that Lucy was different. She’d been impossibly obstinate with them, and that alone was enough to distinguish her from the rest of the travelers, the ones who were grateful for something to eat and a place inside to sleep. Firm in a belief that she could live in harmony with her nature in Portland, she had waved goodbye to the carload of her fellow travelers at the Metal House’s doorstep and had begun asking about work.

The house-members could not throw her out. It would violate what they believed in. They couldn’t throw her out until she broke one of their laws.

She’s after something, Sophie had said on the porch, all of them nodding and smoking their cigarettes.
Samuel had grunted, not knowing that later he would care.  
No one wants to be here that bad, Todd said under his breath as though he were afraid of being heard by her, this is the end of the world. Todd, who, with a small nose and thin glasses, had grown into his bookish face by attempting to read books he didn’t understand, shivered as he mentioned her name. At the time Sam thought it was out of fear, and he guffawed at Todd that day on the porch. 

Nevertheless, Lucy’s insistence on the good life, her impossible belief in spending time at work, made them think of Samuel’s inflexible morals. He kept pictures of the Buddha in his wallet, a cross on his keychain, and she drank at night with a rosary wrapped around her wrist so tight it left purple marks like a rabid, toothed fish. Perhaps they could be after the same thing: a higher order established in the world, God smiling with everyone, happiness, mercy, truth, justice.

Lucy grunts beside him in sleep, turns onto her stomach. Sam will not let himself sleep tonight.

Fuck my father, Lucy thinks, digging nails into her stomach. Fuck that old man. I’ll get him back. I’ll get him back. If we’re really the same, he ought to be afraid of me.

If she’s still here in the morning --

That party. The entire crumbling Victorian decorated in typical Metal House Flair: wires and lights and small fireworks sparkling in the middle of the deserted road. The orphans told him it was the first time he really saw her. He does remember drinking a lot. He was a good drinker, one that stayed quiet and mild enough most nights to let other people have a good time. He only got sick every other week, which the orphans took as a sign of strength, but that Friday he sipped from his whiskey bottle again and again without remorse, his mother, long dead, whispered in his ear, You’ll end up just like your father.

He remembers the surroundings in flashes. The lot of orphans were running through The Metal House like small ants on a tree bark, their pale faces staring out from their dark hoodies made them look like monks, the creaking hardwood floor smelled like mold and piss. Sam felt the weight of everything he couldn’t control, everything he couldn’t make better breathing around him in their ascetic bodies. He kept wishing he could go away, perhaps down South, where he didn’t have to watch them. You’ll end up just like your father. Yes. Yes. Someone was making Ramen noodles, a few were smoking pot too close to the television flipping records and putting in CDs. Make it better, his mother had also told him. Todd, his closest friend in the house, was getting excited about politics, pointing at his copy of The New York Times and yelling about how the Christian Right didn’t really know God.

Sam doesn’t remember saying again and again at the party that life can only be found in destruction. He had not been sick for a long time, so he does remember vomiting loudly enough into the toilet that he thought his kidneys would come out. He doesn’t remember the new girl, the girl that had barely been back in town a week, coming into the bathroom and kneeling beside him with a wet washcloth. He was lying on the linoleum, the overhead florescent light flickering like a fire. She patted his forehead, wiped he sides of his mouth, and he opened his bloodshot eyes for a minute. “Angel,” he whispered.

“I’ll try,” she said.
That was late August. She’s here, in his bed, and in the November dark, when he can touch the length of her body without seeing her, he feels good about this still. In his bed they have no past or future. She is limp beside him. Her breath is even though his fingers continue to brush the length of her body, running along her elbows and collarbones and down through the crevice between her breasts and along her stomach. He begins to moan, and pulls her closer than she was before. There is a sharp intake of breath (hers) and he pulls her legs apart.

She says, “Don’t. Oh. Yes. That.”

As his body moves the blanket slides down their shoulders and reveals a mutual patch of skin. The air feels cool enough to make their mind sharp again. She kisses him stronger, and they’re one body now.

Outside, it’s an early snow, wet and not sticking, and the translucent blue light from the late dawn rings about the room like a church bell.

When they are done they lie next to each other, and begin to talk again. She mumbles through her sleepiness. Sam keeps to the rules: no asking about anything related to the outside world. The orphans are irrelevant, though they bellow in the streets below, calling his name and asking him to go to them. Also irrelevant are the scars over her thighs and cheeks, the existence of her father, lost somewhere in a bar down near Munjoy Hill, a shadow sitting in front of glass of ale. Their windows overlook the early snow, large, wet, white flakes falling over the Black Bay and the graves, falling softly over the lay of the land.

“We’re one,” Sam whispers to her as he feels her body loosening, her mind drifting off to sleep again. “We’re all one.”

Lucy thinks, *We’re just like you, Papa. We’re just like you. You’ve finally won.* She smiles.

He only broke the rules once, and that was before he realized there were rules of conduct to follow with her. It was the first time he really saw Lucy, and he was shocked enough to need to know. What he keeps in mind is the familiar sensation of seeing her silhouette black in the early autumn dusk of Merrill Street a few blocks from the Metal House. She could have been anyone, and her name was on the tip of his tongue. And then the unreality of seeing her face. He’d been practical at first (“You should come with me”) but in the hospital, seeing the blood dribble across the floor, he said, “You’re beautiful,” before he could stop himself.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, again, without taking his eyes off of her since she hadn’t given him any indication that she had heard the first time. The second time she made what must have been a smile behind her hands that held a white cloth to her nose and said, “Thanks.”

The cooper red of the blood sparkled under the hospital glare. At some point during the fifteen-minute car ride to the hospital it had gotten on his pants, his shirt, and, even though he would not be able to tell how this happened, on his neck near his ear. It looked as though she had dove into it. She stank of blood, a thick burning smell, like ash near a campfire. Her hair was matted to her neck. The blood dripped down her wrists and through her fingers and along the floor like she was lost in the woods and relied on breadcrumbs to remember where she had been. It covered her chest. The left side of her face was swollen and purple, the skin so large her left eye was closed. It looked like she
was winking at him, determining his real distance. The few pieces of skin that weren’t swollen or covered in blood, the right forehead and a small section of cheek beneath her right eye, shimmered in the bright white hospital light.

He didn’t say that word again, but stuck around to find out just what had happened. She came back out with a fractured nose, a black eye, and a sprained wrist. Her face was purple, swollen. Her eyebrows looked black against the discolored skin, and even her one eye shone red in the light.

“Money,” she said when he took her into his car. She shook and smoked. “Everything is so expensive.” She didn’t look at him. He believed the statement was a call to some better part of her nature.

He leaned his arm on the cup holders. He was afraid to touch her. He said, “We must believe that God would never give us more than we can bear.”

“Bear.” She ashed. Her one working eye twinkled in the night as if searching for some hidden clue. “You sound like a holy fool.”

“God, the Buddha, our better natures, our universal unconscious. Call it what you will. I believe in doing the right thing. I believe the universe rewards us and –“ he cleared his throat and put his hands on the wheel. He continued, “And punishes others.”

“You believe people are better than they seem.”

“Don’t think about the money,” he said. “Don’t think about whoever did this to you. Try to be as peaceful as possible. God will provide the rest.”

“What the fuck am I going to do about money?” She laughed and took another drag of her cigarette. “Too bad we can’t live like animals. I need a job.”

Sam closed his eyes and grunted. In Portland there are only a few lines of work available to the orphans that their shaggy clothes and disagreeable smell doesn’t bar them from, and all involved seeing things normal people would avoid, weird hours between day and night: diner waitressing late-night, washing dishes, clerking at a gas station, cooking, baking bagels, or stripping. He tried to see her serving a group of drunken teenagers eggs, orange juice, coffee, and buttered toast, in one of the back alley diners, but instead he saw the children staring at her bulging face, one of the bruises near her eye throbbing, her pink tongue’s tip sticking out between her purple cheeks.

“There are the orphans,” he said. “I’m sure that they’ll be able to take care of you for awhile. They have ways of getting what they need.”

She laughed harder, holding her side. She laughed until small tears formed in the corner of her good eye. “You don’t understand.” She told him about the house.

Though he didn’t live there anymore, hadn’t since his mother died, he knew the laws by which they lived, the governance by committee, how they moved as one body with six frayed nerves ready to throw a temper tantrum. They had simple enough laws. Don’t disturb the peace, keep the house functioning, serve those who are on the move, respect everyone’s possessions. Any violation of that guaranteed banishment.

As she spoke he saw the damage: every book in the living room was torn to pieces, the white pages crumpled and scattered on the hardwood. Holes in the plaster circled the couch and the old stereo. In the corner, a small pistol had slid into the floor. Unused bullets were scattered like rice after a wedding. The floor was covered in a fine, white dust and blood rested in a graceful circle where she had fallen. In the car he had seen her there, still lying on the floor, the blood pooled around her head so deep that she
appeared dead. He wanted to ask this girl, *Who did this to you?* He wants to take her head in his hands and watch her smile the lopsided smile. *Tell me, please.*

The Picasso girl who sat next to him had no time for these types of questions. A few stains of blood leaked through the white gauze wrapped around her forehead. She mouthed something over and over again.

He said, “You can’t go back. Things will work out.”

“If I were an animal I could live and eat and shit in the woods or the water.”

“We’re better than that. People have higher natures.”

She laughed.

Sam put his pale hand over hers, and when she turned her bloated face towards him he wanted to kiss her. Her short hair seemed black. Night rushed in around their bodies like a velvet blanket. Sam breathed loudly. *I can take care of you.* His heart shook in his chest.

“You could always move in with me,” he said before taking a long drag of his cigarette. As she would come to know, he had moved out of the Metal House years ago, part of the revolving door of orphans that lived there. They didn’t know his address; he had managed to keep it a secret from everyone. He wanted to help them, not be helped so he lived alone, as close to the clouds as could be borne without wings. No one came to his attic. No one would wait for him by his stoop. No one expected him to hide stolen merchandise in his studio, or let them rummage through his liquor cabinet at three in the morning. *You can’t change what you know too well for the better.*

“Yeah” she said.

He became aware that he must have been wearing desire on his face, plain as day. He rubbed his jaw.

“Yeah. It’s set then.”

“Shake hands,” he said and reached for her good arm. “Shake hands to seal the deal.”

She eyed the white walls of his apartment suspiciously. He looked about his attic to try to see it as she did. Sam had already told her he’d been there for over two years, but there was nothing to the apartment. His futon was left permanently down, the sheets in a twist, the TV sat across from it, and there was an assortment of dirty metal pans in the sink. Nothing was on the wall. There were barely any clothes on the floor. He lived on Chadwick Street, near the cemetery, where the first floor of the entire block was empty storefronts. He turned to her and said, “Come in.”

He stood near the kitchen table trying to get his clothes and magazines in some pile. His cat eyed Lucy with a half closed effort, its white tail waving at her from the kitchen bookshelf. Lucy moved forward, but not far enough. He took her elbow and walked her to the futon, got her a cup of tea. And she sipped it, she looked at the table pushed near one of two small windows, this one looking out across the bay. The other window looked across Western Cemetery. The table and chairs were painted different colors, but the paint was chafing off in wildly optimistic decomposing leaves. Small shavings of brown, gold, blue, and red littered the kitchen floor.

“I loved my mother. I wanted to stay close to her.”

“The graveyard,” Lucy mumbled. Her head turned toward the other window where the dead laid in numerous pale-stoned graves.
He said, “Do you feel comfortable?”
She said, “I feel tired.”
He said, “Lie down.”
And she did. He turned off the lights, pulled off his pants, and wrapped the covers around both of them. He knew well enough not to kiss directly where it was hurting, so he tried to hold her tightly and kissed around her right shoulder blade and neck. He kissed in circles, again and again, moving his lips over the same patch of skin, until he heard a noise. It felt like the wind escaped her body.

He pulled himself on his elbow, and moved her closer to him, trying to get a better look. She didn’t open her eyes, didn’t acknowledge him. He wondered if she was asleep. He tucked the covers around them once again and closed his eyes.

So the first night he already knew there were limits to the thing between them. He started to learn there were rules. The cat watched them from its seat on the television set, its eyes the brightest thing in the room.

He traced circles on her stomach. “How did this happen?” He swallowed and wanted to pretend he didn’t ask, that she had already told him.

For a few seconds the room was terribly silent.

Then her voice sang out gracefully, lightly. He closed his eyes. “Papa, Papa, Papa, Papa. I’ll love you until the day I die,” and she laughed.

He rubbed his eyes and invited peace into his heart.

In the morning he woke before her. He stretched, and rubbed his back. He tried to stand up straight, one hand on his head, bladder full. He saw what was once a black wallet, but was taped back together with silver duct tape on the floor under her coat. Sam fingered the black imprint of a family of seals on its cover, then opened it, held his breath.

Inside were a few pictures. There was one he stared at. Though it was a young family sitting in front of the kind of photographic backdrops used in cheap mall photography boutiques, the father’s skin already looked rough and yellow. The mother’s body leaned away from his hand on her shoulder, her smile thin, tight. The little girl sat between them, grinning wildly, madly, her eyes sparkling with mirth; I’m back, I’m back, I’m back. Sam shuddered at the feeling the father’s loud voice could at any moment bellow through the flimsy paper. You can’t change what you’re close to for the better. Life can only be found in destruction. He put it into a drawer, pissed, and waddled back into bed, the new light floating and bobbing his body back into the tangled sheets.

He laid next to her, and prayed for peaceful hearts. He prayed for the man he saw in the picture, the man he knew from the bar on Munjor Hill. He prayed for the reconciliation, he prayed for grace. He heard his mother laughing, in her cancer voice, You’ll end up just like your father. Just wait and see the kind of girl you’ll fall in love with. Families don’t change.

He rolled close to Lucy, and wrapped his arms across her stomach.

It took four and a half days to run out of food. In his house they ate toast, with peanut butter or jam or butter. They ate canned green beans or olives. They made spaghetti and put butter on it, or just had it plain. They drank coffee too, and when the sugar ran out and the milk smelled too bad they drank it black. Sometimes they sat at the kitchen table that overlooked the bay, but occasionally Sam liked to stand on the other side of the futon
and watch the dead leaves that blew through Western Cemetery. They drank straight out of the bottle, at odd times that he didn’t use before she moved in: in the early morning fresh from sleep, or sometimes the mid-afternoon when the sun shone. She seemed comfortable with this. Her flask never emptied. Her bag filled it each night.

He did not have to worry about work, having urged the teenagers who also worked at the video rental store (and who owed him favors for buying wine and cigarettes despite their adolescent faces) to cover his shifts. Their only reluctance showed in their voices. One said he would miss Sam’s jokes. Another said he needed Sam to calm him down. He was afraid of fighting. Sam said, “Peace is the only option in our lives.”

Still, he knew he hid from Papa Bear, the man who wore gray suits and could always be found in the Black Bay Bar on Munjoy Hill.

For a while she did nothing but lay in his futon, and he turned the television on because it had been creepy to look at her staring into nothing, her eyes wildly burning into the wall. After a day she moved in graceful strides through the cramped attic room. Her face was purple, still bloated, her eyes pink, but this was better than before.

Lucy did not announce she wanted money again though he could see the concern in her face as they went through the food, the anxiety and guilt crowding over her eyebrows and spilling down her cheeks. He knew, from her stories she began at night in his bed that this life with him was not what traveling was like. There, the car moved as a team through stores where they filled their pockets before moving out again only to lay their collection out as a giant picnic where everyone could eat as they pleased, one long organism with so many fingers and elbows and eyes wide with excitement they might have been in a children’s book.

No. He didn’t want that for her. He felt good that he was able to take care of her. They had to be better than an animal. He did not try to guess at things she did not say, what kinds of bad ideas were forming behind her eyes when she stared at the wall.

He pinched himself for this. He knows now that she was planning a revenge, that hate burns in her heart. He listens to her breathe and pinches himself again. He thinks, I do not want her to go. I can forgive her. I can forgive her.

Lucy remembers the feel of the pistol in her hand, its heaviness. She remembers, though she had been back in Portland only a week, how she was able to find to Black Bay Bar without pausing to look at street signs or ask anyone she saw on her way. She remembers how she had to strain her wrist to hold it at Papa Bear. She had sat next to him in the bar, and pointed the gun at his heart under the table. She had said, I’ve been aiming to do this for awhile.

He had laughed. He had laughed so hard one hand had to grip his table, the other the skin over the nose. When she had cocked the gun, he had grabbed her wrist. I only want your mother now. You hear? Only your mother. I know you got her address somewhere. I aim to find it.

He had said, You’re just like me. He had laughed as he pulled her to her feet and took the pistol into his pocket.

Lucy thinks, It didn’t bother you when I came back today, when you saw me for the second time in ten years. Nothing I did bothered you. It didn’t bother you, and it doesn’t bother Sam like he wishes it could. She blinks in the darkness, can feel the hum of Sam’s heart through her back. She grips the pillow. The blankets smell like him. She
thinks, *My father knows how to live and be happy. My father knows how easy it can be when you stop struggling.*

She didn’t even ask about the wallet. He had wanted to believe she liked it there. He took it as a sign that she was happy.

At night he began telling how his mother took it upon herself to feed the whole block’s worth of children each summer. All the other parents were at work, and the kids ran wild, some too young to safely use a microwave. They had crowded into her house around the TV, and some sat on the kitchen counter talking to her as she smoked her cigarettes and made large pots of Mac and Cheese. He did not say, *In the summer we never thought to miss my father. He was too concerned with saving us to be with us.* He did not say, *We tried to please ourselves that our family was not like the others down the block, the ones who were abandoned by both parents for the day and then most of the night.* “She would have loved you,” he said.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“She would have taken care of you. She would have been happy to do it.”

At night he did this again and again: he kissed her shoulders and arms until she makes the emptying noise, and then he was allowed to move his hands over her spine, her thin shoulders. Everything on her body was sharp. He could feel each rib. It was the least sexual activity he’d ever known. Before he fell asleep he thought of his mother wearing her thin nightgown in the last days of her cancer when it seemed that a light could have blown through her body and her hair, already fallen out in clumps, was a small white fuzz on top of her bald head. It made him hold Lucy closer. It made him happier.

In his dreams during the first four days he had thought that he was sitting in the bar next to Papa Bear and the old man’s fingers were tapping his open palm on the table, Papa Bear talked in gibberish, strong syllables in seal barks. In the dream, Sam understood that if he could figure out what the old man meant he could find a better life, he could exit the door of the bar and the world wouldn’t be the Portland he knew but the Portland he wanted: a bright white sky and people casually walking through the streets with happiness and goodness emanating from their faces like God’s own smile. But nothing made sense, and soon blood ran down between Papa Bear’s teeth and Sam could see the gums receding to reveal a thin skull’s white jaw-bone.

Each night he woke, Lucy still sleeping peacefully, his hand somehow having crept so that it covered one of the bruises on her ribcage, his arm having turned into a long stalk that held up the blooming petals of her bruise, and he stared at disbelief at what flowered at the other end of her skin. Blood pulsed between their skin, though he couldn’t tell if it was his own blood he felt or hers.

When she felt comfortable enough to move about the studio freely they sometimes walked through the maze of graves and left presents on his mother’s: flowers, stones, interesting pens, baseball cards. He would not ask her to come with him for food, though they were running lower and lower. He would not admit to himself that he was afraid of what she might do, of what might happen around her.

He knew in his heart that God would take care of Papa Bear. He knew that there was nothing he and Lucy could do besides live a good life. It would degrade them to hurt him. Then they would be nothing better than animals.
When there wasn’t even a piece of stale bread left he put on his shoes and walked down to the grocery store, leaving Lucy curled near the white cat on the futon, watching him until he closed the door. He hadn’t made it down Commercial Street in days, and the cool air on his face and the murmur of Black Bay and the reflection of his wiry body in the empty windows swaying in step allowed his mind to wander. Life can only be found in destruction. You can’t change what’s too close to you for the better. He crossed his fingers and prayed aloud, and his mumbling voice attracted other people’s attention as he walked closer to the more populated area of the street.

After the first night in his studio, Lucy never mentioned her father again. Silence about real parents was considered standard operating procedure with the orphans and the travelers. No one asked, Do you remember what it’s like to have a real home? Do you ever wish you could go there? Do you sometimes want to hear your mother’s voice, listen to your father’s stories, drink tea and sleep in your lumpy childhood bed? Do you wish there could be a garden in your backyard again? Do you want clean floors and healthy food? They used their time in other ways, talked of disasters on the road, close calls with cops, bikes, beers, and acid, PCP, heroin, and meth. This pleased them: jumping fences, exploding soda cans, smoking cigarettes, and talking, talking, talking. They were all right if they were together. Even if they got angry with each other, even if they argued over who should clean up the blood and vomit in the bathroom, or whose moldy dishes were in the sink they are bound together. If they got particularly lonely, they stopped in The Black Bay Bar to listen to Papa Bear.

With a large, bulking frame, and face that looked ragged even before it moved, Papa Bear was one of the orphan’s shepherds, and everyone considered him their own father. He had a dignified walk, though he favored his right leg and the orphans only saw him move to go to the bathroom, or to change the music on the jukebox, and Papa Bear had a voice that boomed across the bar. He stank of sweat and alcohol no matter the time of day and no matter how close anyone stood to him. He greeted them with outstretched arms, and they drank with him in the only bar he stayed in. When Lucy had said, That’s my Dad, one of them answered, Oh, me too, and didn’t understand when she grinned mischievously. Papa Bear could help cure a hangover on Friday afternoon for you to start drinking again. All the orphans, the locals and the travelers, felt good in his presence, as though his hulking shape at the other end of the table gave them strength to go on. He had half a liver but could still drink better than them.

Papa Bear worked the orphans like a faith healer. He sat at the Black Bay Bar each night, and on weekends some of them went there to hear him talk. Something about his large hands and graying hair and speckled face had scared the meek among them into strength. When Papa Bear had mentioned his own before, in the bar, he had bellowed, “Gone to bedevil someone else. Gone and good riddance. We’re all orphans in life until God calls us home.” And all of them felt good about hearing that, nodded their heads, someone even started clapping their hands. They felt like a real family. His real daughter, his real flesh and blood was created with a woman who just up and left one day. Poof. Gone. And so was the little girl child, barely eleven but who already had soft black and blue marks around her neck and a deeply red color painted on her lips and who smelled, constantly, like sticky, moist body lotion. Papa Bear did not mention the screaming before his wife left, the dirty accusations, the broken china and windows, and the orphans were desperate enough to hear advice they don’t care to bring it up. The past is past.
In the wallet picture, Papa Bear smiled under a head full of dark hair. He shared Lucy’s facial structure, the forehead, shape of the eyes, and even the wild-eyed grin.

When he came back, paper bag filled with groceries balanced in one arm, she was not there. He pushed open the unlocked door and the lights were out and the cat lay on the futon and there was nothing but silence. The sun was out, so he made himself a cup of coffee and drank in the chair Lucy normally sat in. The porcelain clinked on the cheap wood and the cat politely ignored him, acknowledged nothing of what he must have seen. The animal closed his eyes and tucked his head under his paws. From the window near the table the water looked dark and violent. He had a vision of Lucy morphing into a seal and disappearing into the Black Bay. He smiled into his coffee.

Within half an hour she pushed the door open, and stood in its frame. She said, “It feels good to move around.”

He couldn’t smile at her, so sure of her being long gone on a bus or holed out somewhere that even he couldn’t find. For a few minutes he thought she was a ghost.

He said, “I missed you.”

She walked to the table, set down her bag and pulled out a small box. The afternoon light fell on her fingers unfolding it, and then the light poured through the twisting glass angels and illuminated her face and the wooden floor with small shards of rainbows. It was a ghastly beauty, her face, the swelling down, the eye a predictable shade of pink. He stood and took it from her hand, hung it over the window. “They sell this at the convenience store where Todd works,” he said.

“That’s right. A couple blocks from here.”

The cat’s eyes widened.

“It’s lovely,” he said.

“I thought we needed some protection.”

It didn’t occur to him to ask what they needed protection from. It seemed perfectly clear at the time.

Later that night in bed Sam pulled Lucy’s skinny frame closer to him, ran his fingers over her hips. “Tell me about yourself,” he said.

She told him about how the car smelled after a few weeks on the road, how the shirt she wore stuck to her skin. She told him about swimming at night in a large pool alone, letting the chlorine dry her hair so much it felt like straw. “And I liked the smell because it was as close to clean as I had come in a long time.”

“That’s not enough,” he said. “Tell me about you.”

“I am nothing,” she said. “I am no one worth knowing about.”

“No,” he breathed again, “No.”

“The only thing you should know is that I’m trying to make everything better.”

He said, “You can stay as long as you’d like.”

She sighed, and then her legs are wrapped around his thighs and he could feel the pressure of her hips sitting on him, the coldness of her hands running down his chest, and, though he knew it was not true, he thought he heard another person breathing heavily near the window, watching them. In the dark the white of her teeth looked menacing, but he soon forgot.
Within four weeks she was perfectly healthy. What little off-color yellow remained on her face could be covered with make-up. And by October she covered everything with make-up, making trips to CVS to stuff colorful tubes into her pockets. Mascara, and lipstick, and eyeliner, and fake eyelashes, and she smoked more cigarettes than he thought possible, and the wind chime angel reflected light onto their bed as soon as dawn tip-toed into the sky, though whenever Sam managed to see that it was because he was getting sick.

Sam had to admit to himself in the November dark, in his bed, with Lucy beside him that he had begun to drink too much. He drank in the bars with Todd, or he came to work with a large bottle hidden under his jacket and he drank there. Lucy drank with him, even woke him up a couple of times in the middle of the night pushing a cold bottle of whiskey into his hands, but it was Sam getting sick. He got sick walking to work, and he got sick in front of bars before going into them. He got sick at odd times when he didn’t feel there was as much alcohol to warrant such reactions. He vomited water in long, pale yellow strings and stayed in the bathroom during mid-mornings. During that time of day Lucy looked as though she was picking up color. Her cheeks became flushed, and her lips a luxuriant red, and her tongue darted from between her lips like a small pink bud as she concentrated on pulling on her denim jacket or plucking her eyebrows using a small handheld mirror on their futon.

When the teenagers he worked with at the video rental store asked if he was all right he told them, “I’m in love.” The other workers, who once so adored him, now kept their distance, safely putting movies on shelves at the other end of the store while he sat near the window holding his stomach and praying to keep everything inside.

They both went to parties at the Metal House. The orphans were eager enough to see Lucy now that she didn’t live with them. They were eager for her stories. Lucy had made up her mind it was better to strip than serve, and she went at her business accordingly. She set out early nearly every morning, and came home with surprises. She took home ecstasy tablets wrapped in dollar bills, pot, cigarette lighters, even the toilet paper from the dressing room bathroom. Her pockets ran deep. She took keys to doors she couldn’t locate, and pictures of the men’s children. The orphans adored this, and came up to her throughout the night to run their fingers on the fine things she could pull from each pocket.

Sam stopped arriving with supplies. He no longer came with food, cigarettes, Advil, or extra booze. He barely had enough to keep himself happy. He drank in a corner until his tongue became so thick he hollered in another language.

Someone at the house found or stole or bartered for a case of fireworks and they began to set them off every night. Sam never found out who was responsible for it. The explosions rang down the street, and the lights reflected in the dew-soaked pavement. Everything was golden. He wanted to sing. For a few nights in a row he thought he saw Todd take Lucy’s hand on the street, he thought he saw them whispering together, but when he looked back they weren’t there anymore.

Lucy wanted to believe that her life was getting better. He preferred thinking that. At night, as he’d turn off the lights, she sat up straight on the futon mattress and prayed. First she mouthed things he could never make out, then she began to get louder and louder, as though the strength of her voice would get God’s attention. She prayed for forgiveness
for wanting more money, and then she prayed for more money. If God was merciful the next day he granted her coked up men with limp dicks who pushed bills into her garter belt as though they were giving charity at church and she wouldn’t have to do anything, really, except listen to them talk, or perhaps talk nonsense to them in her lowest, loveliest voice.

Yes, at night she prayed, and the next afternoon, if she was supposed to work, she pulled on her jean jacket, a short black skirt, to walk the four blocks down to Todd’s car, Todd who somehow always knew when she was working, and always volunteered a ride over the bridge to the club.

When she wasn’t working Lucy and Sam used the early afternoon and walked hand in hand down Commercial Street, stepping at first past the bare concrete floors of the empty shops near his house, all the way to the dock the ferry leaves from. They waited to hear the sound of the seals who swam around the wood and caught fish in the thick ocean water. Their barks echoed up the rocks and damp wood. It’s hard to see their small bodies moving through the oil-dark water, but their cries were as sharp as the wind moving around a building. When she leaned over the railing her hair falls around her face and twists in the wind like a tornado. I can see them, she told him each time, whether she could or not. She smiled at him through the twisting, dark cloud of her moving about her head and he smiled back, says, “That’s good. That’s good,” though he was not really sure if he was trying to calm her down or if he just wants to tell her everything will be all right.

Sam hadn’t heard the shots, though it was clear in his mind when it happened. He had been working at the store, restocking the foreign shelf when one of his coworkers stumbled in, out of breath.

“Dude, this is the best thing that has happened to Portland in so long.”

“Dude?” Sam said.

“Gunshots,” the teenager said. “Gunshots. A shit ton of them. At the Black Bay Bar. You wouldn’t believe how many cops are there.”

Sam set down his movies. He stood, arms at his side. He smiled, widely. He hummed.

“I didn’t know they even allowed guns in New England. Isn’t that something they check at the border? At like Connecticut?”

Sam left. The bells on the store’s door rang after him. He walked home.

Lucy was in the attic. Sam came in, and kissed her. Then he saw a large bag sat on the futon. She was throwing clothes and make-up into it. She said, “I didn’t kill him.”

He stood back. He said, “I didn’t think you had. We’re not animals.”

“Todd told me it would be like a book. He said that I had to do something to respect myself again.” Lucy told him that Todd had given her back the gun, that he had told her that she would be a romantic hero if she brought the gun to the bar and made Papa Bear cry for his life like a fool. Todd had said if it were a book she would make herself the heroine by trying to do something to right herself.

“Did it work?” Sam said.

“No. But I love him for thinking that it might.”
She said that when she brought the gun out everyone in the bar dove below their seat, except for Papa Bear. He stayed at the bar, sipping his beer. She began to shoot at the bottles of liquor, not ten feet from his head. He finished his beer, looked at her, and said, “I am the love of your life.”

Lucy had said, “I’m in love with a man, but live with another.”

Papa Bear had laughed. He had pulled his cup around the other side of the bar and poured himself more. He had said, “So you’re more like your mother than me.”

Sam listened to all of it. Then he began throwing her clothes out of the bag, screaming, “I love you. I love you.”

Lucy said, “You’re glad it happened. You’re glad. You’re tired of this life.”

Sam said, “I’m going to save you from yourself, whether you like it or not.”

*Please don’t sleep, please don’t sleep, please don’t sleep.* Sam stares at the ceiling, pinches his arm under the blankets. He can tell she’s awake, the way her shoulders move under the sheets, and the steady way her body is facing away from him, her hands delicately folded under her cheek. *November. We should be together more, longer. I forgive you for everything you’ve done.*

The attic breathes with the possibility of her leaving, of his waking in the morning to the white cat staring unapologetically at him from the kitchen table. *It was all so obvious,* the cat might say to him, *and, asleep, you missed it. Like an apparition wild at night she went about the dark of the room packing her things. It was careful moving, and what makes its way into her messenger bag might be accorded special meaning: a tube of toothpaste, extra socks, a small photograph of the coast, a traveler’s mug, a collection of stamps, someone’s wedding ring. Then she moved into things she knew weren’t hers: money in your wallet, two granola bars, a bottle of Sprite, Tylenol. She walked back to the Metal House and Todd answered, sleepy and wearing only a pair of plaid pants. They hugged each other, the cold of the early morning turning their breath white.*

*Oh yes. You missed it. And it was beautiful, the white of her skin, the glow of her eyes, the precision in her silence. Quick. In and out. It’s such a small room, but she didn’t make any noise. Maybe she was a ghost all along or maybe always part animal like she said, and now she’s mutated back to a seal that swims out along the bay, the beautiful cold of the water hardly touching her skin, and she calls for her family, for the beasts that know her thoughts by smell.*

And, as he hears this, Sam might sit on one of the kitchen chairs, light a shaky cigarette, and stare out over the bar, its dark waters shifting in the early, misty gray autumn morning light. Then, not bothering to shut the door behind him, he would descend through the bowels of the house, moving through the alley, the snow, heavier, sticking on his black jacket…

Sam’s dream shifts. He can see the glass flying about the Black Bay Bar. It shatters. He hears Lucy’s enraged grunts and Papa Bear (Oh, Papa) only laughing louder, “Yes, now I know. Now I know even you don’t know where your mother is. So we’re both abandoned. We’re even.” A breeze picks up, red leaves fall over everyone’s head from the nearby sturdy trees, in the distance a cargo ship’s horn moves out from the dock.

A dream. Somehow he’s standing beside her, watching the shards of glass sparkle in the air, though by this time the crowd has dispersed into a chorus of seal barks and wild ashes, the red of the leaves whipping near his shins.
And the bed, bigger though, the sheets warm, soft. The seals bark. Something splashes in the water. Lucy and he struggle under the covers, and somehow he ends up with his hands on her throat. Her eyes widen (lovely eyes, just like her father – even in the dream, just like Papa Bear) just as he starts to push down, tighten his grip, and Sam smiles a ghoulish smile and the seals bark beneath the window and she stops struggling, her cheeks assuming a final ghastly grin.

He wakes to the sheet moving under him, to the sight of her back as she sits. One of her feet touches the floor, her naked body uncovered.

He wraps his legs around her, pulls her beside him. He begins to strangle her, wanting them both to wake.
Lonely Woman: Spring, 1993

Even waking to the thick gray outside, the gray that hovered around the town and smothered the surrounding dead fields and bare, twisted trees, was better than being asleep. Since Ellen disappeared, Leah had been dreaming of her on good nights. In these dreams they were in a thick forest, and the leaves turned to her like opened hearts and Ellen’s straight blonde hair was pulled into a tight ponytail. Ellen wore army fatigues, sometimes walked through a dense forest, sometimes held her hands high in front of a crumbling brick wall, waiting for Leah to shoot her with a handgun that had mercifully been put in Leah’s hand. Ellen’s right eye was mangled, its flesh frayed as though someone altered it with a fork. Her blonde hair stuck to this side of her skull, and flies circled around her head. Standing in the café in early March, looking out onto the darkened, mid-day street and seeing Mirka make her way over, Leah couldn’t shake her head to get rid of the image.

Mirka, Ellen’s fraternal twin sister, jerked her body through the streets, its intent on the café. Leah wished someone there were more people with her. It was the kind of day to rely on regulars. The other waitress, a girl named Mary Anne who had been picking up hours after her bartending job cut back, left early. Leah had spent most of the day wiping down the long L-shaped café windows that runs along two sides of the building, cleaning out the serving fridge under the counter, and sweeping up stray coffee beans. Near the cash register an already thumbed-through local paper sat. Its front page picture, the elementary school burning with orange and red bursts of flame flowering, open petals cutting through the gray sky, was brighter than the surrounding salmon covered walls hiding in the gloom. The fires had been what the few people who came in wanted to talk about, the homegrown twins already old news.

Still, Leah didn’t want to start anything else, didn’t want to become the center for information about Mirka and Ellen again. There was no one to expect at the late afternoon hour. So far, Ralph, the occasional dishwasher, had been in for his cup of coffee, and the bike shop had ordered their sandwiches for a pick-up. The overweight, huffing record store worker had been in too, and after he quizzed Leah about whether Neutral Milk Hotel or Of Montreal would make a better soundtrack for watching buildings burn had sat for the meal listening to his headphones.

There were, at that moment, two tables, one of which hadn’t ordered yet.

Were Ellen still there, she would have entered with Mirka arm-in-arm, laughing. They would have traveled directly from their store, a secondhand junk shop at the other end of the street, to the bank. Then they would have sat at the end of the café near the window. The twins would have talked in loud whispers, leaned over the table, and pointed their fingers at people passing by or sitting on the bench. They always had their secrets. They always shared their secrets with each other.

It was their typical time, but strange that Mirka would choose that day. She hadn’t been in since Ellen left Athens a month and a half ago. Mirka wore her usual brown bangles and large sunglasses in spite of the weather. Her electric curls hung around her shoulders, but Leah didn’t want to look at her too long. Leah saw Ellen in front of her, could hear the dream voice yelling Shoot! Shoot! She thought I did this to Mirka and now
she’s out for revenge then grabbed the paper. Leah turned to the article on the elementary school fires, and held it in front of her face.

It didn’t keep her eyes from looking. As Mirka got closer and took off her sunglasses, Leah saw her brown eyes were thick as mud, as though earthworms and bugs could have crawled out of her head. Mirka was too tall, and her freckle-packed face too serene, to match the dark circles under her eyes.

As the small bell dinged on the back of the door, Leah tried to smile at Mirka. “Sweet potato fries and a hummus sandwich?” She could recite most of the regular’s orders from memory.

Mirka’s head jerked back on her shoulder. “Oh. Yes—“

“And a cup of coffee?”

Mirka nodded slow and steadily, opened her mouth like she wanted to say something else, but Leah walked to the other table. She kept her back turned to Mirka as she took their order. When Mirka’s food came out, Leah brought it over to the table.

“Leah—“

The phone rang, clear and sharp. Leah smiled, “Just a minute.”

She could hear the bangles move as she felt Mirka’s hand around her wrist. Mirka moved fast, like a monster in a dream. “I tried to warn her. It all happened so quickly,” she said.

Leah’s neck stiffened. Ellen appeared in her mind as she did the night before, blood streaming down her cheek, her lips pulled into a grimace. Leah’s feet moved her backward.

The phone rang again and Leah answered in a cheerful, chirping voice. A laugh swelled from the receiver. “I bet you sound that way in bed,” Mary Anne said. She put on her best sultry voice. For a girl who grew up Baptist, this was a challenge.

“You’ve been talking to Nick again.”

Leah kept her on the phone longer than she had to. Mary Anne wanted to go out later that night. It was a weekly ritual that Mary Anne didn’t want to give up despite the sudden departure of one of the twins, the bad weather, and Nick’s inability to say anything anywhere anymore. Leah was not usually a talker, especially after another woman, even one she’d lived with, had brought up sex. Leah was sturdily built, not fat, but her construction was made for work. During the call her color drained. The strain of talking made her fingers twist the phone wire, her eyes stare at the wall.

A girl at one of the tables said, “It looks like someone is breaking up with her.”

“A broken heart’s never easy to mend. You got to find just the right person who’s willing to do anything for you,” the boy said next to her. They held hands.

Leah swallowed and agreed to everything.

By the time Leah turned around, Mirka was already gone. None of her food was eaten, but there was a large tip.

“Fuck happiness,” Leah said to herself. “Fuck happiness. We’re in love.”

She picks up the money and folds it into her black apron. There’s no secret, she thinks, There’s no secret because I didn’t do anything wrong. Her mind started like an old projector. Nick and Ellen laughing close together in a dark bar. Nick’s fingers on Ellen’s hips. Ellen’s blonde head leaning against Nick’s shoulder. Sheets tangled around Ellen’s body. The old cat’s eyes on her skin, everything still in the early dark.
She stood in front of the window, her head in her hands, until the cook asked if she was feeling all right.

“I just need something to do,” she said to him.

“Was she still wearing those bracelets?” Mary Anne asked as she sipped on her beer. She leaned back in the booth waiting for Leah to answer, and twirled her green ring.

Tuesday night they normally met after their work, going from one bar to the next. That night they were at The Go Bar, sitting far back in a dark corner, watching other people dance. The girls wore elaborate, dark dresses with low v-cuts and strange jewelry that sparkled from their nose or their lips. The boys wore tight jeans and appeared to not have bathed in a long time. Leah had already told the story about Mirka twice, but at that point Mary Anne just wanted to savor it. Mary Anne was not what could be called a friend. Skinny and small, Mary Anne delighted in other people’s stubbed toes, paper cuts, broken dishware, and burnt dinner. She questioned and prodded people in conversation grinning wildly at the most gruesomely self-deprecating remarks. She was funny though. She always made Leah laugh. She had a squealing giggle, and wore thickly textured and brightly colored sweaters that entirely covered her breasts. Mary Anne was the kind of alert, intelligent woman Leah had always wanted to know when she reached a certain stage in life.

As can be imagined, one of Mary Anne’s hobbies was talking about other people’s problems when they were not around to talk about the issues themselves. For nearly two weeks after Ellen left, the fate of the other twin had been all she could talk about. Since things had been burning, the nursery on King Street, the garden center on East Broad, and now the elementary school, the twins were boring enough to be glossed over or barely acknowledged, but now Mary Anne was gearing up for another go at it.

Leah felt tight in her chest. She knew in some way she and Nick were on display, people were starring into their bedroom and judging what went on between them. I didn’t do this out of meanness, Leah thought. We’re better now. We’re really in love.

Mary Anne said, “She always wore those ridiculous earth-mother outfits. Long skirts and big bangles. Old before her time. I can’t imagine any man ever. Well. You know. No wonder Ellen –”

“Yes,” Leah said, clinking her beer can on the table. “No wonder.”

No one would say precisely that Ellen had disappeared. It was more that she ran off, or that she simply left town. There had been nothing wrong at the house that night – no broken glass or abandoned car. Ellen had taken everything, her toothbrush and jeans, and racks of long brightly colored t-shirts. She didn’t leave a spare hair in the sink. The cops had been called, of course, but that was because Mirka cried and howled so loud it seemed like the wind wailing in a strong storm. She broke all the windows of the house. No one Leah knew had seen her that night, but the story was so well discussed around town that everyone knew there was snot running out of her nose in a long string that ran to her shirt.

The most polite thing to do in front of Mary Anne was be quiet. Leah held her own stiff hands under the table. Mary Anne’s theory was that Ellen ran away to be in love, since living with Mirka wasn’t exactly a man-getter. Her brief affair with Nick before he ran off and came back from New York didn’t count, at least to Mary Anne who thought you have to be dating someone for six months for it to be a real relationship. You
have to be able to eat dinner with them in public and be embarrassed about how they hold chopsticks, or be able to go out to a movie and kiss through the previews. According to Mary Anne, you have to be able to do all of this and not be afraid if anyone else knows about it, including your own sister. It was Mirka they were hiding from. Mary Anne said this smiling, nodding, as though it should have been easy for Leah to agree.

And Tim? How much could they really see each other with Mirka always around? Sure they sat next to each other at the bar, sure everyone could see the way they smiled, but everyone could see Mirka’s locked jaw, the way, when drunk enough, she had pinched Ellen’s skin so hard she left white half-moon marks on her upper arms. They had their own way of life. The twins had shared a small house at the end of Pulaski. There, they had kept a garden in their backyard and planted vegetables and flowers. Passing the house from early spring to late summer, the twins could be seen in the backyard, large hats covering their heads, big sunglasses on, hands in front of their faces to conceal their laughter.

No, Ellen was far too beautiful, and getting far too old to be in that kind of life for much longer. Taller than her sister, with more manageable hair and clean blue eyes, Ellen could have been a poster child for Nazi sympathy. Mary Anne couldn’t let go of the image of tall Ellen scurrying across an airport floor, her arms holding onto Tim’s waist under his coat, her head glancing over her shoulders just to make sure she wasn’t being followed. Mary Anne drummed her perfectly red nails on the table and grinned to herself. She said, “Romance can be so beautiful.”

“Being in love is a lot of things, but it’s never beautiful.”

“I’ve known you since you were eighteen. You’ve been planning your wedding for as long as I can remember. Through six different boyfriends. Classic A-line gown, petunias for your bouquet, roses on the tables, and tea—”

“And cookies for wedding favors,” Leah said. She took a long sip of her beer. It was dark outside. She imagined Nick at home. He would be watching a movie by now, perhaps sitting on the couch picking at a guitar. “Those are such childish things.”

Leah turned her head to watch the dark porch outside. A few huddled smokers stood underneath the awning. On the left end, near the iron fence was the table where the twins had sat throughout the summer. There they had laughed and blown cigarette smoke into each other’s faces. They tapped each other when someone approached they had just been talking about. In those sunny evenings Leah had liked to sit quietly at the end of the table and listen to the twins tell stories about their store. They had been the town harbingers of secrets. Her and her sister talked of how so-and-so had wanted certain things to inspire their lover, how someone else wanted to buy all the old women’s magazines and typewriters because they had wanted to write a historical romance.

And there had been one night, the night she thought it would be okay between her and Nick. It had taken weeks after each of Nick’s band practices to convince Tim that Ellen liked him, and there was no point in regretting this now. On the drive to the bar he had asked her, Why? How do you know?

Because she looks for you when you’re not around, Leah had told him, and Nick had nodded at the statement from the passenger seat as she parked near The Go Bar. The way he agreed so easily, how he kept his eyes focused on the ground in front of the car, made Leah blush. He would be the one to know how to read Ellen, she thought to herself. Nick would know all about it.
It was true when they got there. Tim got up to get another beer, and saw Ellen glance over her shoulder anxiously. Leah smiled at him. When Mirka got up from the table to drunkenly stumble toward the bathroom, her long skirt catching around her legs, Tim took her seat beside Ellen and offered her a cigarette, a sip of his beer. They were too busy looking at each other, talking, to notice when Mirka stood over them, lips pursed together, wanting Tim to give her back her seat. It was Leah who offered her own place to sit down, and as she and Nick walked toward her car she thought, Good. Let her be in love.

Looking at the twins’ empty table gathering rain in the darkness made her shiver. She realized that Ellen would have looked for anyone, that she had wanted to be in love.

“What have I kept you too long?” Mary Anne sipped her beer, smiled. She asked in a way that said she was ready to move onto other things herself. “Nick must be so lonely when you’re not around.” Mary Anne said this as though she is particularly proud of a younger sister. Mary Anne has never dated a boy for more than three months. While she was never without a boyfriend, she refused to let them spend the night, spending all nights alone in the same white-roomed house Leah had shared with her. This made an evening schedule a necessity if Mary Anne were to go home, meet a boy, and have enough time to sleep. Lacking it, she might develop wrinkles under her eyes, black lines, like Leah.

As she got into her car, Leah swore there was a body hiding near the shadows of the front bar’s door, one that took a jump toward her but then stopped suddenly. She thought again of Ellen’s bloody eyes in her dreams, and, for the first time, of Mirka’s dark eyes, ones that saw the same thing in her own sleep. Leah laid her head on the steering wheel and thought I want to be in love. I want to be happy. She can’t blame me. She can’t blame Ellen. I want to be in love. Love. Love. Love.

The truth was Nick was better off alone. He worked part time at the local bike shop altering gears and filling tires, and spent the rest of his time working on songs, reading, or, in warmer months, sitting on the back porch writing poems, his calico cat curled under his chair. He needed the silence to get into his projects, he explained to Leah. They’d been living together since he came back from New York, and nearly seven months after he moved into their condo he was still recuperating. Each morning he sat on the edge of their double bed in silence, and watched the white wall. The cat laid on the pillow and purred. I never appreciated being alone before, he said a week after moving back. They passed through most nights in their double bed without touching, and before she drifted off to sleep she imagined the door locked tight, the dew settling on the grass and the dark road that rolled in one direction toward town, and in the other toward the state border. Prove you love me, she thought over and over again, Don’t wander anymore. Prove you love me, prove you love me, prove you love me.

Each morning, before she went to work, she laid out the food he would need to eat through the course of the day: a can of soup, some bread, or a stack of five peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She marked leftovers in the fridge with sticky notes, Eat this. When she came back after drinking beer with Mary Anne at the Go Bar there were three plates in the sink, a few crumbs on the counter, a red sticky stain near the stove. From this, and the guitar sitting on the kitchen table, she could see him moving about his day: Nick eating toast over the sink, Nick finishing leftover pizza, Nick opening a bottle of wine
when his band, minus Tim, came over to practice. All this was good, so solid that she could almost reach through her mind and touch Nick’s cheeks. *Don’t ever leave me again.*

He was lying on the couch, his legs pulled close to his body while *101 Dalmatians* played on the television. The cat splayed itself across the living room floor. Nick woke within a few seconds of her standing over him, but the view was long enough for her to see in his face the child he must have been.

He used his right hand to roughly wipe his face to attempt a smile. He was still tired. He cleared his throat a few times and sat up.

She sat next to him on the brown couch. The TV illuminated their faces, made their skin blue. The light cast a small net around the couch, the armchair, and a portion of the bookcase. A digital clock flickered its red light in the next room. The cat scuttled into the kitchen. She heard it lap water. With night peering in, the blackened windows seemed solid, as though they were in a basement, the ground and dirt staring in from all around. She watched his face as she said, “Mirka came in today.”

Nick grunted in acknowledgement. He rubbed his cheeks.

She wanted him to remain as he was, or perhaps to take her hand into his cold one, to kiss it gently the way he did sometimes when he wasn’t listening to her anymore. Nick usually disappointed her with his reactions. He had been the only person she was able to tell about Ellen who didn’t already know. She had heard about it during the morning shift. When she came back in the late afternoon, he had been in the rocking chair on the porch, staring into the dying leaves. “Ellen’s disappeared.” She had said this without seeing his face, without a *hi* or *hello*, and in such a dry tone that she might have been talking about bird anatomy. She said it in order to say, *She won’t bother us anymore.* She said it to banish his face kissing Ellen’s neck, to pretend that he had never really been separated from Leah, had never been with Ellen, had never decided on New York to leave them all. *She loved someone enough to leave with him,* Leah didn’t say. *He loved her enough to tell her he was going.*

He had rocked back and forth a few more seconds before saying, “Good thing it wasn’t Mirka. She’s always been the prettier of the two.”

That he cleared his throat again and glanced at his feet. “How was Mirka looking? Do you think she’s getting enough sleep? Eating enough?”

Leah walked upstairs without looking at him again. The sound of yapping dogs followed her feet.

That night, she had one of the other dreams, a bad one. This one involved Nick. In it, she still lived with Mary Anne in their small house. The radio played in the kitchen, and Mary Anne sang along, sweeping the cool linoleum floor. Birds chirped outside in the bright sunlight. A breeze moved the curtains. From the couch Leah could see into her open bedroom, the sheets still rumpled, the clothes strewn over the floor. Then came the knocking, and the house creaked like a ship far out on water. She opened the door and Nick was there, in his black coat, a duffle bag over his shoulder. “I love you,” he said. Behind him night came fast, the sky turned turbulent. Ellen, beautiful Ellen in a red dress with a large turquoise stone around her graceful neck waved at her from the sidewalk. The house creaked again. He smiled at her.

*What is she doing behind you?*
“Who?” Nick didn’t look confused when he asked this question. He still smiled at her.

Leah! Leah! Mary Anne called from the kitchen. The walls were all lop-sided. The paint flaked off. The wooden beams were being eaten by all sorts of bugs, maggots, cockroaches. Something fell from the ceiling. Leah tried to wipe it from her shoulder, when she looked at her hand she saw ash.

Leah! Leah! Leah turned her back on Nick, was walking toward the kitchen when he said, “You know I love you.”

In the kitchen, Mary Anne stood in the middle of the room, the broom still in her hand. Her skin turned gray, splintered like ice. Her irises looked white. Why are we sinking?

The house rattled. Boards fell, walls collapsed in the living room Leah had sat in just a moment ago. Earthworms crawled over Leah’s shoes. A fog horn, a deep moan, the earth opened, Leah felt the hollow sound through her chest, then a falling, falling ---

No. Leah was certainly not unhappy. She leaned against the salmon covered wall in the café. Mary Anne blew a bubble, one of her skinny legs lay over the table. She was painting her nails red, a different shade than the day before. A copy of the paper was laid in front of her. Mary Anne said, “They still don’t have a suspect in all those fires.”

At times when Mary Anne complained, she was just trying to brag. She complained about paychecks, and her own ability to cook, about banging her head into cabinets or doors, and this statement about no suspect for the fires was certainly a brag.

“Just think,” she continued, “The police could come in and start asking you and me. For all they know, I mean for all we know, one of us just snapped and began our arson career.”

Leah closed her eyes and imagined the roar of the empty elementary school burning as all those stuffed animals, picture books, and small desks disappeared. “I wouldn’t have the energy.”

“That’s what you say. Maybe that’s even true on some level, but come on, admit it, wouldn’t you like to watch those buildings burn? Just to hear those sirens squeal? Just to know you made the whole thing fall?”

“It’s not where I’d start.”

“Oh me neither.” Mary Ann leaned closer to her nails, her eyelashes fluttered with concentration. “I’m not sure that cherry-watermelon splash is my shade.”

“Hmmm.” Leah nodded, turned to sit in one of the chairs at the table Mary Anne occupied.

The carpet frayed near the windows. From where they sat they could look out past the bank, and almost see the tops of the trees that sprouted along the road on the outskirts of the campus. Everything was gray. The big oaks and the long white ashes were bare. Their branches hurt for want of leaves. They clapped toward the sky. The cook closed the oven door. Pots and pans rattled.

“Fucking nasty,” Mary Anne said after following Leah’s eyes to the old carpet. “That needs to be replaced. Everything in this town is falling apart.” A green ring sparkled on her thin finger, its color made more beautiful from the contrast between it and the shiny red layer of nail polish.
It was not that everything in the town was falling apart. The café was the second most run down building, a victim of poor revenue rather than lack of commitment. First up was the twins’ store, or what used to be their store, a grubby brick building near the bank and the red-roomed bar where Mary Anne worked, a building whose windows were blocked with brown paper.

It had been open everyday. The last time Leah ventured into it she was on a double-dare from Mary Anne. Two months after Nick came back, after he had apologized and she had cried and had admitted everything and they were living with each other, the twins had been incessantly giggling in her direction at the grocery store, across the Go Bar, or even as she served them coffee.

“It’s killing me,” Mary Anne had whispered in the kitchen. “Find out. Find out. I’ll give you my ring. You’re frightened, right?”

It was fear. Being the harbingers of secrets, the twins were able to know what you wanted before you could open your mouth in their store. They would walk calmly through the dimly lit halls, the twisting walkways between the piled clutter, and pick perfectly between the broken clocks, china cabinets, yellowing magazines, monogrammed towels, and flower vases. They took out boots because you’ve always wished you were taller or pink earrings because that’s your lover’s favorite color. They took out albums that you lost your virginity to.

Leah didn’t want Mary Anne’s ring. It wasn’t the kind of ring she had been interested in. Leah wanted to know Nick was hers. She wanted to know that his sleeping body, his silence in the morning, his dry elbows were hers for as long as she wanted them. Whenever the twins had giggled in her direction Leah was sure they knew.

Before their store door closed behind Leah, even before Leah’s eyes could adjust to the gloom, Ellen had appeared beside Leah and took a hold of her hand. Her blue eyes had cut through Leah. Her smile had been wide. “I know. I know what’s perfect for you.”

“What?” Mirka stood behind the counter, a long stream of a receipt in hand. She stared at them, her face twisted into a stern, maternal warning. “Ellen, don’t.”

But Ellen darted about, too busy to hear her sister. She pulled a pair of white high heels from behind a rack, and a clear necklace from behind a busted stereo. She moved so fast that Leah could barely keep up with the outline of her shape in the dark store. Finally, she pulled out a long, cream-colored dress that had big, white beads sewn onto it. Leah stiffened. “For your wedding,” Ellen said, her pretty face brightening into a smile then cracking into laughter. She threw back her head and her eyes closed and her knees buckled beneath her. She leaned against an orange couch.

Of course. They were living together. Nick and Leah had been living together for three months. It should be expected. Leah had always wanted a family. She had enjoyed talking about her wedding while she drank beer with them on Tuesday nights.

Leah held her hands and bit her cheek.

What bothered her was that the twins were never wrong. They were never wrong. His dry elbows. His silence. His crumbs, and his cat. If they thought she would marry Nick ---

“It’s not her fault,” Mirka said from behind the register to Leah. “You should just count yourself as lucky,” Mirka said to Ellen.

Ellen laughed harder. Tears formed in her eyes. Then she began to sob. The sound echoed across the room. “I’m so lucky,” she said, “I’m so lucky because I have you.”
Leah stood there for a few seconds, the open box of shoes and the necklace laid out before her. She felt her own body in the dim light. Lines were forming along her eyes that didn’t go away. The veins stood out against her the bones in her hands. She was getting older.

“It’s not her fault,” Leah said.

“It’s not her fault,” Mirka said. She covered her face with her hands. “It’s not her fault.”

“These things can’t be helped,” Leah said. She had thought, Oh, God, let her fall in love with someone else. Let her see just what it’s like when they decide to love you back.

As she turned to walk away out of the corner of her eye she had seen Mirka shaking her head. Ellen was still on the floor, her weeping had subsided into long sighs.

When Mary Anne had asked her what happened when she went in their store, Leah had inhaled, the words had almost formed (I don’t want to marry Nick – I don’t want a family that bad), but then she shook her head. “Nothing. Nothing. I didn’t go in.”

From what Nick had said, Ellen was the one who had wanted to marry.

The cook began to sing. His voice was muffled by the kitchen door. Leah smiled. Mary Anne had stopped painting her nails. They both sat at the same table.

“If you could say one thing to Mirka what would it be?” Mary Anne asked.

Leah stared at Mary Anne. Mary Anne smiled, a twisted expression as her jaw munched away on the gum.

“It’s better that someone’s far away and in love than close to you.”

“Well she’s coming this way now.” Mary Anne smiled even wider, her thickly made-up cheek cracking under the force. She said, “Lonely woman.” Her lips pouted.

There, across the street, Leah could see her and she thought, Oh no. Mirka looked worse than she did the day before. Her hair rested on her shoulders in long tangles. She wore the same clothes, mumbled to herself as she moved.

Mary Anne could not stop staring as she came in. Leah smiled, placed a menu in Mirka’s hand. It dropped on the floor.

“Cup of coffee?” Leah said, ignoring the menu.

“Thank you,” Mirka’s eyes glassed over. She walked to her normal table, without acknowledging Mary Anne.

“Go to the bank,” Leah said at Mary Anne. “Get going.” Seeing Mirka out of the corner of her eyes, shoulders slumped, eyes a grizzly blank, Leah thought again Mirka must be visited by the same nightmares.

“I want to know everything, later. She always talked more to you.” Mary Anne’s eyes stayed on Mirka as she moved with a large green envelope that contained the money the café earned the day before through the store and outside along the street.

Leah didn’t say anything as she placed the cup of coffee in front of Mirka. She stood near the table and watched Mirka gaze out of the window. She looked like she was in a trance, as though the fog had set in on her mind.

I love you, Leah thought.

“I tried to warn her.” Mirka whispered this.

Leah pulled herself into a chair. She saw the pulse beating in Mirka’s neck.

“Love destroys. It kills what we are,” Mirka said, looking into Leah’s eyes.
Leah’s hand unfolded in the middle of the black tabletop like a flower. Mirka reached for it. She held it hard. “Love only thinks of itself. That’s hateful, and hate like that can turn the blood in your veins,” Mirka said.

“Oh my God.” The cook and dishwasher stood in the middle of the café, their white aprons, stained with the spices used, floated around their knees.

“She doesn’t exist anymore,” Mirka said, the exhaustion from extirpating Ellen from how she knew the town cracks her voice. “She’s dead. To me.”

“That’s the best thing about love,” Leah smiled at her, “It kills you. It knocks you dead.”

“I feel as though I’ve just woken up.”

The front door banged. Mary Anne was breathless, her shoulders heaved. She was lit up, her cheeks flushed, a smile forming on her face. “Fire.” Mary Anne’s voice was shrill like a bird in a forest. “Fire. Fire. Oh my god. Your store is burning.”

Leah could hear the chairs being brushed aside, the bell dinging as the door was banged into, but couldn’t feel herself moving. Outside it was true. A few people were coming out of the stores up and down the street to stare at the inferno forming in what used to be the twins’ store. Its tendrils curled into the sky, an orange and red blossom unfurling into the gray. More people moved out onto the street, their necks craned upward, their mouths opened. Mirka stayed in the doorway, a light breeze curling her skirt around her legs.

Leah pulled her hands from her cheeks, noticed the ash wiped around her wrist, rubbed into her open palm.

Closing her eyes, Leah still saw the orange and red coming through the formless gray. She could hear other people gasping. Her heart pounded in her eyes. She imagined she stood in front of her own house, that the twins stood together, off to one side, shyly hiding their smiles, as Nick’s body, with his exposed red heart and baking arteries, turned white and heavy as ash, and their bed, the couch, the television, melted to ruins, floated away in smoke, and blew away in the wind. Gone forever. Gone. Gone.
There was nothing he cared about more than art. Alan considered this and breathed in. His head ached. He stood in Cora’s living room, she near the sofa, and he by the bookshelf. He had not been there long enough to wipe the charcoal away from his hands. They were having another argument. It rained outside, had been raining for a god dam week. It was a cold rain, a late spring. Cora’s walls were spotted apple green, the sofa and chair a light, French blue. On the coffee table a few books were spread about in a pleasing manner; they were on the Impressionists, Renoir and Cassatt, no one interesting or daring.

Alan had gone to the Savannah College of Art and Design for a year, sold a piece, and dropped out. His favorite professor, a man who made books and taught two classes, lived in a small, one-room hut behind a bed and breakfast, urged him to do so. Alan had gone to his hut to get advice. His sale was a large amount of money. A New York couple, who worked on Wall Street, were spending the weekend in Savannah, saw his work on a coffee shop wall and liked it. Alan had felt comfortable asking them for what he knew the piece was worth. The Bookman said he had done well. Alan sat on a small cot. The Bookman sat across from him on the workbench. A gray tabby moved in and out of the shack through a small hole in the wall with the impropriety of a ghost. The Bookman said, “Now is the time to do what you’re meant to do. Now is the time to really work.”

Alan had looked at his hands. They were dirty and burnt from a fryer. He worked thirty hours a week at a café on River Street frying French fries and fish strips to make enough money to pay rent and cover tuition and books. “I won’t have a library like this to go for.”

“There’s not an infinite amount of time,” the Bookman said. “Take your chances while you’re young. Give into the work.”

The gray tabby jumped onto the worktable. In front of the Bookman were leather, velvet, pages made from ostrich feathers. The cat meowed at Alan. Its whiskers twitched. “Maybe I should go North,” Alan said. “It’s cheaper away from the coast.”

“I started out in Athens myself,” The Bookman said. He held out his hand, and the cat ran over to him, purring loudly. “You can get attention there if you make it into the local paper, Flagpole. New York art dealers read it.”

“Athens?” Alan looked at his hands again. “Athens.”

The gray tabby jumped onto the Bookman’s lap and sniffed at his pocket. The Bookman pulled out a packet of jerky and held out a piece. The cat took it onto the table, purring contentedly. “Remember, Alan, there’s not an infinite amount of chances. Take advantage of what you can.”

Alan nodded. He would get into Flagpole. He would get a good review and sell his work. He rubbed his hands, slowly, telling his burns they would be gone for good soon.

“Oh, and Alan, stay away from love.”

“Love?”

“Don’t fall in love. Don’t get distracted.”

Cora said, “I believe in you. I believe in you.”

Alan said, “But you don’t believe in yourself.”
Outside, it thundered. The rain picked up. Alan thought, *I am not working. This is not work.* He had been in Athens for twenty-six months. According to Ian, the one for whom the affair had the most importance, he had been sleeping with Cora for three months. For Alan it felt like three years. Each day, he got a little less work done. Each day he thought about his work, the painting and the exhibition, a little bit more. Cora’s house was bright. Candles burned near the windowsill. It looked like a dream. He bit his lip.

“I believe in what we believe in,” Cora said. She started to cry. “I believe in making art that makes people happy. I believe in making people free.”

Alan looked at his hands. He laughed.

“I’ll make you dinner,” she said. “Come into the kitchen. Sit down. I’ll make you dinner. You’re too stressed out about the exhibition. You’ve been working too hard. Lie down. You should relax.”

Alan laughed again and ran his hands through his hair. He looked at her. He walked to the door.

“Stay, Alan,” Cora said, following him as he put on his coat and walked to the door. She was crying harder, the tears falling quickly down her face. Her voice was clear.

Alan kept walking, gripping his own hands.

She was good enough not to call his name.

He turned to look at her. Cora’s blonde hair turned gray in the rain, her pink floral blouse faded into the paleness of her skin. Her face was red. She stood in front of her open door, the lights from inside turning it, and the large living room windows, into a small, budding leaves. Cora looked like a wilting flower on top of a young stalk.

He turned. He could feel her eyes watch him move until he turned a corner.

It was a three-block walk to Clayton. Alan passed the windows of the deserted second-hand store, some smashed and splintered, some whole where he could see himself through the gray of the season: thin black coat, short black hair, and paint-splattered jeans. The pain in his temples subsided. He felt good for being the only one on the streets, and some part of him felt better for not thinking *I have to sell my art*, for not thinking *Two days until the exhibition*. Of course, this second part could not have explained the lightness it felt in absence. All Alan could do was walk, the vacancy in him showing through the spaces between his teeth as he smiled.

He made it to Caledonia, the red roomed bar on Clayton Street, sat close to the bartender, gripping the wood of the counter, listened to someone laugh and thought *That’s fine, not I should be working.* This bar and not another because of the bevy of townspeople hiding in its dark corners, and smoking near its steel furniture. It had to be this bar and not another because Allen wanted to find someone to talk to, someone who might understand. Joel would be busy, preaching Biblical truths to the college students and the homeless on Broad Street, taking thanks for his work in beer and bike gears. But perhaps Nick would be there. Alan had not seen Nick in weeks. The whiskey burned, but only for a second, then the lights seemed to melt onto the bartender’s face, the strange tan of her skin turning red, and her gum-smacking lips looked blood soaked. “I could paint you,” he said. Color was all he wanted, beauty. There was nothing he cared about more than art.
“And sell it afterwards,” she said. “See all the money you’d make.” She made a motion to someone behind him. It was a bartender, open-handed motion, a *See anything you like?*

Alan didn’t bother to turn around. He could hear a woman behind him laughing, a male voice crying out in surprise. *Other people. I might be happy knowing one of them.* The shadows moved about the bar, and the lights outside twinkled in the falling rain, and there was noise, noise, noise. Alan knew what was to come next, though for a second it was held in abeyance as he noticed the condensation on the glass was brown. Ian tapped him on the shoulder while Alan rubbed bar napkins over his fingers and hands trying to remove the charcoal. Before Alan could say anything, acknowledge his presence or think to ask about Cora, Ian sat beside him in a long huff, the rain sticking to his glasses and plastering his thin comb over on top of his balding head. It was useless to pretend about the fight, about the crying. He had been out there, in the rain, all the while looking in the windows at Alan and Cora. Ian had seen it all.

“You ought to get better about making her happy yourself,” Alan said, staring at the screen broadcasting a small sports item, which seemed miles away from the dark and wet town. Hot-aired Florida, not somewhere he’d ever imagined himself going.

The older man tried to speak, but Alan grimaced, and shook his head in the direction of the television, dimly focused in on it, like a loss in Florida was a deal-breaker.

“I do love her,” Ian said, the small yellow scarf glowing around his neck. He was fiddling with the castaway damp napkins. “You should consider for yourself what it means to sacrifice for something you love.” Ian nodded and stood. “The exhibition in two days—“ Ian stopped. “I’m sure Cora feels strongly about you apologizing before hand.” Ian nodded again, proud of himself for speaking to the point.

Alan gripped the bar with both hands and thought of sculpture. With eyes closed he had a half-sepiaed dream of sculpture: fish wire, metal, hooks, and sparkling glitter balls twirling over burnt and bent aluminum. No color. Wait. He winced. No, no, no. *Art has to be something worth giving to another person. Something to make their lives better. Art can’t be about what pricks you.*

In the darkness the noise of the bar returned to him. It was a transformed glory. In it, the rush of the noise and the blue lights from the open sign, the green from the television, the red lips of the bartender, he could see wet streaks running down Cora’s face, and the painting he has been working on for the exhibition, the reds and blues of it flowering before him like a landscape of a dream.

“That was Ian?” Nick slid to the bar next to him. His plastic-rimmed glasses were fogged from the rain. He stank of a fryer. Nick didn’t need to ask, and Alan didn’t need to answer. Their bar was a small room, with a side yard of tables and chairs to sit in during the summer. “I think you can strike a balance. Ian’s a good person to have on your side.”

Balance was a recent concern of Nick’s. From what Alan knew, he had been living with a girlfriend and one day, when fires still raged in town, she had come home and said, *I realized I wish you were dead today. burned up and gone. Maybe part of you already is. You can’t stay here anymore.* Since then, Nick had been consumed with his desire to make sure people knew he shouldn’t be dead. He lived in a one-bedroom house across the street from the bakery, and he became a fry cook at the Bongo Burger, serving
people things they couldn’t or wouldn’t make themselves everyday. Even in the shadows of the bar, Alan could tell there were dark circles under his eyes. He took his sweater off, briefly, revealing his white shirt, the yellow stains under the arm pits, then decided it was too cold without it. Nick’s fingers drummed the bar. He looked like he rarely slept.

“You’re on my side,” Alan said. “I’m on yours. Worked today?”

“You can’t smell it, there’s something wrong with you.” The bartender brought Nick a beer. Nick winked at her, and she hit his arm with a towel. “Everybody’s gotta serve something,” he said to Alan.

He knows. The realization was so sudden it made him dizzy. He knows about the deal I struck with Ian, the deal about Cora. “All I want to do is make art,” Alan said.

Nick stared at two long-legged girls at the other end of the bar. His head was cocked in that direction, he leaned back in his seat. He stopped fidgeting. Alan thought he might not have heard. Their hair looked neon yellow under the lights. Their jeans were stone-washed, hip-hugging. “It’s primal,” Alan said, to himself. “We’re all animals.” He laughed.

Nick groaned and rubbed his eyes. He said something under his breath (She’s not an animal?) and then said, “All I want is to fall in love.” He took a long sip of his beer. “All I want is to fall in love with someone who loves me.”

“Have you seen Cora’s art?” Alan could not argue that she loved him.

“All don’t look,” Nick said, laughing. The gray in his stubble caught the television light. The sleeves of his sweater were moth-eaten. “Well, look, but look at something else. She’s not such a bad looking girl. Besides, you might get a job out of it, some kind of money. Ian knows people.”

Nick was half-right. Ian knew people. It was impossible for someone to start and run Flagpole without knowing lots of people. But, he was wrong with Cora. Cora was as irregular as her work. In the same way that her hair curtailed all colors besides yellow, making her a sodden blonde, the work was a crapulent display of objects that lacked empty space. Her coloring washed itself out with the amount of hues fighting each other, both on her skin and on her canvas. She blushed easily, turned green with anger and envy at other artists, and smiled at him like a flower. She agreed with all his positions, made him chocolate raspberry cookies, and risked nothing of herself. In Alan’s mind, it was impossible to hurt or appreciate that kind of love. As far as he could tell, there was nothing that separated her from all the teenagers on the campus who filled the introductory drawing courses. Alan had lectured her about this a little over three months ago, going off on some of the greater artists and artistic impulses, how risk was needed, how higher ideals translate into work, and she had fallen in love with him while sitting on a stool in front of her dirty sketch pad, both hands resting gently on her thighs, eyes wide, and a smock draped across her shoulders.

He should have kept his mouth shut. He should have kept working.

But Ian, Flagpole, the articles that get sent across the continent.

I have to sell my art.

Cora crying. Cora throwing her head into a pillow, the sound of her groans subdued by the green cotton.

Was this relief? Did he feel better?

Keep it together for a few more days. Until after the exhibition. After the article the New York people might read.
Alan ordered another whiskey. The gum-chewing bartender smiled at him, her quick fingers slid down another glass.

Nick cracked his back, and laughed. He was not such an old man, but the gray poked through in his beard, and his hair was thinning. “We made smoothies today at work. Look at this,” he said, and held up his hands. Despite all the scrubbing (his palms were pink) the berries had dyed the lines on Nick’s palms blue, making his hands look like a geometric formation. Alan leaned in further to see the calloused layer of it, the way it circled around the palm. He thought of Joel’s feet, how the holy fool had decided months ago to walk without shoes turning his soles into a calloused, intricately spun web of red dirt.

“Beautiful,” he said.

“There’s nothing else,” Nick said, smiling at the two blonde girls at the end of the bar.

“There’s love,” Alan said. He held his own dirty palms in front of his face, stared at the circles of skin on them.

“There’s that.”

“I’m never going to sell another piece.”

“No one should get their first sale out of school like that, and certainly not for the amount of money you did.” Nick shook his head, gripped one knee with his hand. “Enough to live on for two years. Enough to live like us for two years. So much to lose.”

“I’m never going to sell another piece. No one will know my work.”

“Not if Ian decides otherwise.”

With this Alan nodded his head, laughed to himself. He stood and stretched his hands. Nick slumped forward, his elbows touching the dark wood of the bar. The girls were talking to each other, giggling and looking at him out of the corner of their eyes.

Alan touched Nick’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he said. He left half a whiskey, walked towards the door, where a large man sat, arms crossed, eyes on the television instead of scanning the entrant’s IDs.

To sacrifice, for love, for art. Cora. Make her happy. Sell some art.

It was all in the deal.

It was hard for Alan to remember how all of it had begun. He had wanted to make art that made people feel good. It was that simple. Was it changing? He had studied the slides constructed in the Tate Modern, seen the video of normal men and women in suits sliding down three stories and squealing all the way. That was art. Happiness. He wanted to still believe this. Art was helping other people find happiness, find surprise, find shock in how wonderful is the world was. Art needed an audience. And Ian had said that he could help him. That’s what their deal had been about. Making people happy. Get more people into Alan’s exhibitions, where large murals done in red and velvety purple night illuminated the brick streets of Athens, its sandy buildings and bodies standing under magnolia trees, their faces upturned and glowing. He painted frogs balanced on the sculptures throughout town. Made realistic portraits of buildings, but painted the street in front of them ocean blue. He liked surprises, in his work. He wanted it to be bought, to be praised, to be seen.

At the time Ian and Alan first made their deal Alan had no way of knowing how the agreement would be brazenly enforced, how there would be no hiding from Ian, or
Cora for that matter. He never had a moment alone. Alan had learned in the three months he saw Cora, in the three months he spent the night at her house or had dinner with her instead of working that love was nothing if not imprudent, spiteful, jealous, and petty. It needed and needed, it focused on its own satisfaction. Alan tried to compensate, to sneak about Ian and Cora to get work done. He stayed up sixteen, eighteen, sometimes even twenty hours, or as few as seven, sneaking into and from his own house, the skinny a-frame with two large porches off of Pulaski, at odd hours so that Ian and Cora wouldn’t know. When Alan walked to his studio in the morning, Cora waited for him behind mailboxes, bearing gifts of taffy and Rice-Krispie treats, always something too sweet to taste good.

Ian was more invasive. He appeared where the silence of sleep should have been. He was dedicated to the punctual, the simple, and the elegant. Ian appeared from behind shower curtains, out of dark closets, and, once, from behind the small space between the couch and the wall. He would pull himself from the shadows of the house, regardless of how or when Alan sneaked into it, and begin speaking, “I love her. I love her. You must be more careful.” Alan blamed the house, how it diaphanously stood in the middle of a clearing, how the inside of it lacked doors or furniture. Then, he realized, It’s love. To Ian, Alan was an ingrate, ignorant of his luck in love.

Ian first appeared in Allen’s room amidst the grave flower of night, the darkness blooming across the corners in velvet curls. There was no door on Alan’s room, but the closet was a long hall and Ian came out of it as though he were merely on a pleasant evening stroll. The room was a mess, scattered notes and sketchpads piled in corners, several papers dark with plotting, were strewn across the floor. Allen slept with books piled under his mattress. (He wanted to absorb it all by osmosis, he claimed, and therefore he spent his time reading Gardener’s History of Art over and over again near the small camp light at his bedside. By the time Ian arrived, the light had gone out, Gardner was splayed open.) Even in the dark, Ian had the sense to tip-toe around the books before kneeling next to the mattress.

“I love her,” he said on his knees, the aqua of his sweater its own source of light in the dreary night. And indeed he did. Ian had fallen in love with Cora at a gallery opening in Lamar Dodd, not long after Allen had delivered his diatribe about ethics and risk. There, though standing meekly in a corner, bangles on her arm clinking each time she nervously shifted, she had nonetheless been contemptuous of each of Ian’s thoughts on the paintings in the room. It was a new feeling to him, that amount of contempt. It was something that could not be controlled or edited. It was something that did not arrive on time. He sent perfunctory gifts of flowers at five, carried a bottle of red wine under his arm hoping to meet Cora in the street, I just bought it. You like red? I didn’t know. We can share this one if you want. However, Ian saw that as inimical as Cora had initially been to him before becoming oblivious, she ingurgitated Alan’s thoughts, ideas, and habits with no sign as to being full. Ian saw an elegant way of making her happy, a simple shortcut to give her what she wanted. “I love her, I love her,” Ian had said that night, kneeling in front of Alan’s bed. “If she’s happy, I’m happy.”

“I just want to create something meaningful, something worthwhile,” Alan had said, wiping his calloused, stained hands over his forehead, thinking this must be a fever dream. “I want to give myself over to the work.”
“We can come to some sort of agreement,” Ian hissed at him. Then the outrageous cruelty, the jealous need should have been apparent. The house was in silence, not even Joel banging the screen door in hopes of running out to see God in the moonlight thrown onto the yard. “Make her happy. I’ll write whatever you want. Just, please, dear God, make her happy. I love her.”

When was there time to work? On the morning after he left her crying he found a bag of oranges on the front porch. Alan stood there, barely awake, his jeans still unbuttoned, looking through the door, past the oranges, over the gravel of the front yard, and into the street in front of them. His street, Pulaski, was set far back from the rest of town, ran into a dead end. There were trees strangled with vines, a dilapidated warehouse, and a railroad track along the way. Alan could hear and see nothing. He yawned, stretched. His head withered with pain, something yellow flashed in front of his eyes. He rubbed his temples. After a few minutes, he leaned downed, and, guiltily looking from side to side, picked up the small box and walked toward the kitchen.

His headache stayed low, sweet, and plentiful, running from the crown of the skull in a descent to the spine. The food had been appearing for three months, since he began to see Cora. It was needed: cans of tuna, chocolate, nuts, and exotic fruit. There were five who lived in the house: himself, three Radishes, boys who stuck so close together and shared everything they needed only one name, a color that fit their mud-stained clothes, and Joel, the local holy fool. Poverty hung about the house in its cobwebs and lack of light. Though the A-frame’s cabinets were bare, most of the house was littered with trash: empty jugs of wine, crumpled newspapers, and broken boom boxes. There was no furniture, only two couches in the living room. Outside, everything around it was dead. It was the end of winter, true, but the grass didn’t grow in the front lawn, even in summer, and the dirty smell of gasoline drifted from the warehouses, and the kudzu shriveled by the time it wound its way to their back yard. The trees hung at a distance to the house covered in kudzu, blowing in the wind, inviting someone to step outside.

The food might have been divided evenly among its residents, but the Radishes slept with a determination seen in cats and newborns. Sometimes for sixteen-hour stretches the house was heavy with slumber, as though it might lose Alan’s improprieties in sleep. When they weren’t asleep, the three of them did nothing but ride their bikes through the streets causing pedestrians to tremble in fear of spotting the blurred shape of their black hoodies coming toward them. Either way, they were not around for the food. Usually, Joel and Allen walked barefoot along the corridors as the three bike riders slept through the day, eating the treats Cora left on their front porch, piling the empty packaging into a corner in the kitchen. It never helped the headache, but somehow talking to Joel reminded him of what he should be doing.

In the kitchen Alan pinched the skin over his temples. The floor was black and white tiled, some squares shattered into small pieces. Alan took one of the oranges and stared out the screen door to watch the stray cats moving through the trash. They stared at the light through the door, hoping for scraps. The headache intensified for a moment with the light, the animal’s mewls. The pain became so bright that Allen could only sense their movements, the strange way they held their head at an angle toward him from the
distance, as a dance. That was all their pain was, a beautiful collapse of body and world, a blur of the lines that separated.

The morning was a gray fog of mist and a gentle breeze. It was not raining, yet. Joel moved through it like a bewildered knight errant. His head bopped on his neck as though any moment he might exclaim the grandeur of God’s plan, and the torn bag he wore over his shoulder, the one in which he carried a worn copy of a bible and a bottled refreshment, cut through the glistening morning dew with a gentle earthy sullenness. His feet were bare, the calluses formed from long-lost blisters. The cats moved from under his feet with their tails between their legs, not bothering to pretend fright. Inside, Joel eyed the oranges with a smile, his beard too scraggily to be dignified or even suggestive of an Old Testament seriousness Joel yearned for. He made a b-line for a jug filled with water sitting on the counter.

Another person who believes in making things better, in shocking people into happiness.

Art is practical. Art is real. Art is a solution. Art is kind.

Alan wanted to believe.

“You look like you’re up to no good,” Joel said, still holding the plastic jug, a few streams of water sticking onto his beard.

Alan spat seeds through the open screen door, watched the cats watch him back. Should he feed them they would come closer, perhaps even begin to purr as they chewed the food. Should he throw the rest of his orange at them they would scatter, squeal, their noises echoing off the trees in the distance, the light illuminating the space between the raised hairs on their tales. Perhaps it would be enough of a disaster to wake the Radishes.

Alan spat again. “Save anyone today?”

Joel smiled at him, took another mouthful of water. “The Flagpole isn’t out yet.”

“What do you mean?” Ian had an emotional punctuality that might be envied.

There were doubts he still slept. Somehow he managed to still make deadline, articles praising things Cora might have enjoyed had she bothered to read it and still follow Alan wherever he went.


“It’s early.” Alan shrugged, taking another bite of the orange. Without Ian, without his newspaper, there was no audience for art. It would not be a gallery opening without Ian and his paper of homegrown snobbery. Having made Flagpole into the kind of publication that cared about the local artistic pursuits, Ian felt himself singularly responsible for the record deals and New York art dealers coming to Athens. How else would anyone from the outside world know about the town? Any cultural event was mainly attended by who ran it, or their friends. Ian covered bands and art openings and even the small symphony, made up of a rag-tag group of volunteers. He had done everything he could to turn the town into something special, and felt himself a patron of everything of higher-minded in the area.

“Ian often sleeps in. He’s a patient person who enjoys delay.” Joel guffawed, picked up an orange, and shoved his bag to his side. With his two front teeth he chewed through an orange’s skin.

“He’s sick,” Alan said shyly, looking into the clouding sky. If Flagpole stopped publishing…

“It’s been raining for a week.” Joel sat beside him.
Two cats got into a skirmish over a scrap of food, something tossed into the yard by God only knew. The fog fell over them, a haze of forgetfulness. The housemates above them slept through it, perhaps turned onto their sides and sighed at the morning. The oranges Joel and Alan ate smelled of sweetness, but could not compete with the mold crawling from the half-open, warm refrigerator. Poverty.

*Focus on something beautiful. Convey the goodness in people to them.*

“I can’t do this anymore,” Alan said to Joel, the pain between his temples overwhelming as he watched two cats scratch each other, their yowls of pain reverberating through the fog.

It was Joel’s saving voice, the one reserved for the crying, the destitute. “Remember, there is always something bigger than yourself to focus on. Don’t get caught up with these people. You don’t belong to them, you don’t have to serve them.”

“I’m serving them? You mean like a margarita?” Alan turned to Joel and smiled at him.

Joel unclenched his bag and removed a pint of whiskey.

Alan considered the light that moved over Joel’s features, seemed to cascade over his skull and left his eyes dark. The cats returned to their posts near the door, heads cocked and ears up. Joel nodded his head, “God created us to serve something.”

He considered the light through Cora’s hair; yellow hitting yellow and those strange empty eyes, like a pit. Her hair was yellow, pure yellow, like the light moving through the corn she had been surrounded by as she grew up. Cora had been a solitary creature, prone to pouts for attention on the Iowa farm. There strange bugs flew in and out of the stalks, and large birds appeared from the ground like they blossomed. It was yellow everywhere, the small chickens that ran through the yard and the corn stalks, and eventually it seeped into her hair. Placing Cora in the town was an act tantamount to cruelty. She seemed bewildered at every street corner, or, worse, she took no notice of cars and moved out into the streets at dawn without looking at them to make sure they would slow down.

He could not have considered, at the same time, Alan’s own recent, silent prayer for himself: *Get hurt, get hit, get hurt, get hit.*

Gone. Ian. Sick. Out of work. The paper…

Alan took another swig of his bottle. The greater good? Uplifting?

He thought, *Love is always the disguise of something else. Love is selfish. Love is a need greater than it can admit to.*

“God didn’t create for happiness?”

Joel took the whiskey back, gulped a few swigs. Something cackled in the trees, a song that could not be made out. “Oh, no. Whatever it is, it’s not happiness.”

“I’m going to the studio. I need to work.”

“God be with you. Don’t think of the money.”

After crying hysterically the night before, Cora showed up bright and early and ready for work in the tip of Allen’s studio. She carried a small batch of raspberry brownies and wore a shade of pink that served to heighten the sensation that she was a drowning victim. Allen was already there, the light moving around his body like a fragile fog, as he scurried along the edge of his canvas that he had laid on the floor, and continued to mix the paint in order to fill out the doors he had constructed. In his tall-walled studio, the air
turned into a bright, clear sharp object. Everything twinkled if he faced the windows at the wrong time of day.

He tried to ignore her, as she set the plate on bookshelf’s ledge. He had been working ever since the exhibition was announced on a singular piece, one that seemed to extend from the canvas, to invite touch. There were a series of doors, recognizable Athens doors from the red roomed bar, and the Bongo Burger, and the old second-hand shop, and behind each of them he had twisted fabric into the shape of a small animal. He picked up more paint to draw thin lines between the boxes. They were alone but they were not. They could have been ignored, but the surprise, the beauty, lay in finding them in the darkness of their walls.

Ian had not managed to put *Flagpole* out yet. All over town the small distribution boxes lay empty, the free paper nowhere to be seen.

Across the street someone yelled. The walls in the building were thin, and it faced the neon lights of a strip club that made the entire building shake at night. The stairs into the studio were a steep ascension, a catalogue of creeks and groans. He put it to Cora’s credit that she can move without making a sound.

He thought, *Love is blind, a carnivorous craving. Love is hollow.*  
*Think of doing something better than yourself.*  
Alan rocked back to his heels and held his temples.

The pain stayed sharp as he saw pieces of a new project, the same from the night before: the dull monochromatic charcoal glistening on paper folded around two figures, burnt, bent aluminum, the glisten of clean fish hooks…

No. No. No.  
*Think of how you want others to feel.*  
“I was wondering what kind of food you wanted.”

Alan looked up, shocked to remember that she was still in the room. He found himself hypnotized by her teeth, the flat, sameness of them. How their whiteness glistened between her lips.

“The food you wanted at the exhibition.”

He shook his head, still not understanding her words from the movement of her jaw, the way her teeth caught light.

“Come to my house. We’ll choose the banquet foods.” She said everything while smiling, while maintaining eye contact. She was never accusatory. There was something about Cora’s love that excluded bitterness while remaining flourishingly servile.

“It’s tomorrow,” Alan says.

“I already made some preliminary decisions, that’s true.” As she said this she pulled her sweater off to reveal a thin, light pink shirt. Cora had the frightening look of something near drowning. Her skin was thin, so thin she had a blue-hue, and the veins underneath it were wide. Alan stared at the revelation of skin, and she continued to talk, taking it as a compliment. “I don’t know what to serve first. I was hoping you could help me.”

Alan closed his eyes and the image stayed there. The stick figures, the dark beneath them, a few splatters of red paint, the matte flatness of the sculpture.

No. No. No.  
*Think of something that will make people happy. Keep trying.*  
*Ian. He’s sick. It’s all been for nothing.*
Then he saw something even more hideous, the shape of a picture that would wake anyone up. It was ugly, its teeth sharp, so hideous for a second he closed his eyes.

“Cora, do you believe in God?”
She smiled at him. “Of course, dear.”
“Do you think he intended well?”

She stepped closer to him, eyeing the small animals he has twisted out of fabric, the ornate doors they hid behind. *Beauty behind the ordinary.* “Most creators do.”

He looked up at her, saw her long, pale neck. He has had a dream. He cared to remember fully. A dream of laying on top of her, moving his hand up her side and resting his palm over her throat. He wanted to know that she was alive. He wanted something more than devotion and discipleship. He wanted to see something about how they were living. In the dream she was cold to the touch, his throat swollen, her eyes bloodshot. If he were to go to her house he would stalk the rooms, look at her furniture, ask her questions about how much things cost as though he had never been there before. Each visit he found something new to ask about. It would have been no different than other days. She would have followed, answering with that chirping noise in her throat. He would ask how much sugar she eats, where she buys her paint from, why she buys pre-stretched canvases instead of making them herself. He asked and each time she answered with a sweet chirp, her head cocked toward him. Alan would start to shake, find himself wanting a fight, a desperate one, with anger and cursing, with two voices raised instead of one. *This isn’t what art is supposed to be,* and both might agree.

Then, they would eat lunch, and undress in her bedroom. Birds would chirp outside.

Ian. His head might be seen through the window, the tip of his brown glasses.
Ian. Perhaps a gentle tap on the screen door, a few threads of his scarf caught on the tree that faces the dining room. Enough for Alan to know he’d been there, enough for Cora to ignore.

Ian. He was sick. There was no one watching.

Alan closed his eyes again to see the image before him, the gaping mouths, the teeth, the maroon of the blood, the slants of the lines.

*All right. It is what it is. Believe in what you see.*

“You’re on your own with this one.” He looked up at Cora without smiling. “I have work to do.”

It was nine. The exhibition had officially started. There weren’t even students there to watch the artists unveil their work. It took place in the building where Alan’s studio was. Though they attempted to play classical music, the sound of the strip club across the street permeated their small gathering. A few women in heels braved the steep stairs and walked around the wooden floors rubbing their arms, looking chilled. The Radishes, the housemates he barely spoke to, stood in the corner sipping coffee, yawning. They wobbled on their feet, dark hoodies pulled over their heads to try to hide their yawns. Their bikes stood leaned against the building. They showed up to anything with free food. Joel, though busy with his work on the streets with the homeless, had stopped by earlier and pulled him aside when the other artists were putting up their work and adjusting light.

“God is gracious and good,” he said while drawing a cross with his fingers over Alan’s head. “God is gracious and good when we look at the truth and don’t run away.”
Alan smiled into his beard, his alcohol stained breath, and Joel had pulled out a small flask of whiskey.

“God be with you. Don’t think of the money.”

Alan wasn’t. He smiled as he stood outside the bathroom door. It was an unhealthy breath he heard from inside. Feverish. Certainly not crying. The low moan of tears was absent from its spidery consistency. Alan leaned into the frame, listening. Ian coughed for a second, then continued his breathing. The sound came from the floor. He had been in there for nearly ten minutes. Alan knocked on the door again. “The show’s going on,” he said.

A voice came from the floor. It said, “Go away.” More coughing slithered between the door frame.

No matter what Ian would be unable to write about what he had seen. All the effort, all the trying, had been for nothing. Alan couldn’t lie to himself any longer. No one was happier because of their deal, no one was going to see art improve the world.

He smiled and clapped his hands together.

It was time to reveal it all, as it was.

Cora stood across the room from him, wearing a red dress with a high neckline. His was the only project in the room still behind a curtain. He covered it with a thick, blue sheet that had been sitting in his studio for a year. He had made it once when he was putting on something with puppets for the local children.

They were all waiting for him to unveil it. Cora kept nodding in its direction, smiling, adjusting her weight on the high heels.

Stepping away from the bathroom door, Alan tiptoed to his canvas. He had spent the last day working on it, hadn’t slept at all. As he pulled the curtains away a gasp went across the room. The two sleepy housemates spat the wine they were drinking onto the floor. Cora held her breath. The image was ghastly.

All fifteen people seemed to sputter at once.

“That’s awful,” someone shouted near the windows.

A woman near the front covered her mouth. “It’s – It’s.”

“Of course it is. What else would it do with that claw?” A man near her said. He pulled his shirt away from his neck, breathing heavily.

“Terrible,” the Radishes said, his eyes glazing with wonder.

Alan put on his coat and smiled at the room that Ian would have to make sense of when he left the bathroom, article or no article. He knew there would be no art dealer. Cora covered her mouth with her hands. People pushed closer to the piece, the housemates kept hitting each other on their arms. Awake, awake, awake at last. They reached out to touch it. A few fingers ran over the fish hook. Someone giggled.

Cora followed him down the stairs, the sound of her weeping echoed on the wooden walls.

“But what about art? What about making life better for people?” She sobbed as he buttoned his coat on the stairwell. He rubbed his temples to find the sensation of no pain, of nothing. He was not worried anymore. There was no hiding from himself, how he enjoyed seeing Cora cry, the blue of her eyes turning aqua. There was no hiding the reality of his life, his kitchen tile streaked with dirt, the empty space of it shining where there had once been furniture, nor the blisters on Joel’s feet, how Joel walked on them to learn to suffer.
Alan pulled out his flask and swallowed. He held the cool metal between his two palms. They would be burnt and calloused by July.

“You told me,” Cora stands by the door still sniffing. “You told me you wanted to make real art. You told me you wanted to make people happy.”

He opened his mouth. He wanted to say something about risk. He wanted to say something about serving the truth, even if it’s a sacrifice.

Cora shook her head and wailed louder. She began calling his name though he still stood in front of her.

He put the flash back into his pocket.

Alan walked in the direction of the Caledonia. Whatever art was, it wasn’t that. It had nothing to do with helping another person. It had nothing to do with what Alan wanted himself to want.
Cora studied Harry’s profile in the late afternoon light, considered where her fingers should touch when Harry would be aware of her touching him, when she was startled out of her desire by a tapping on the driver’s side window. Harry trembled, and leaned rolled into the passenger door. Neither was in a mood to answer the knock. Cora wanted to carry Harry to the week in the country as soon as possible, and Harry, slumped into his seat, could not suffer noise.

Cora rolled down her car window. A skinny man with a scruffy beard stood close enough for her to smell the coffee and whiskey on his breath. “Good morning and God bless you,” the man peered into the window at the both of them. Cora noticed that, despite the coolness of early spring, he wasn’t wearing shoes. His feet were a mixture of pink scars and dark red scabs that hadn’t healed yet.

“Joel,” she tried to smile at him, but kept wincing from the smell of his breath as he leaned in through the window. “What do you want Joel?” They weren’t the usual kind that Joel attempted to spread God to, as though the Almighty was a form of the flu. They weren’t young, at least not like they used to be. They weren’t students, or homeless. They didn’t have tattoos running the length of their bodies. They would have been grateful if Joel ignored them like the rest of the town.

“I want to tell you,” Joel trailed off. His eyes roamed across the backseat. Some of Cora’s glass jars were filled with Harry’s dirty laundry, and the containers of bleach sat lopsided on the floor, jars of ink balancing on top of them. They were packed to the gills, what with Cora determined to take all of her art supplies and Harry determined to bring everything in his apartment to clean, all the sheets and clothes that he had taken a dump in or sweated through till they were yellow. Joel’s fingers gripped the side of the car and his jaw locked. To Cora, his smile turned into a jeer. “I want to tell you God loves you. Don’t forget. Love is right here.”

Harry slumped forward in his seat then jerked his head back. He smiled at Joel, his eyes half closed. Harry’s teeth were yellow, the back molars brown on top. Looking at him, Cora could see his collarbones through the thick of his winter sweater. “Thanks, Joel,” he muttered, though it was unsure Harry had noticed anything that had transpired since Cora had helped him into the car.

“Thank you, Joel,” Cora tried to smile, to scoot his fingers away from the window. “We’re late getting started to my Aunt Joan’s.”

“I am serious. Love is everywhere, available any time. God wants you to know that.” He stared at Cora, his eyes unmoving.

“We’re late,” Cora said, her eyes becoming steady and hard. “We have to get going now, Joel.”

He pulled back, stood up, and walked backwards from the car. Cora’s stomach tightened, a similar guilt she had gotten since she had realized that she loved Harry. He is who he is. He can’t help it. Who are you to ask him to do anything else?

“We’ll talk about this later. If you want.” She smiled at the holy fool, waved her hand. “We’ll talk about this later.”

Cora didn’t look like she could spare a later. She always had, it had just gotten progressively worse over the last year. Her eyes and skin were a pale see-through blue,
and her hair hung on her back like a wet weed. That couldn’t be helped, but Cora’s fingers shook if she weren’t grasping onto some solid object, black lines collected under her blue eyes. She was known for pacing the streets of Athens, hands in her pockets, her eyes scanning store windows, parked cars, and gutters.

“Lonely,” the blonde bartender in the red-roomed bar on Clayton Street said, winking. She curled a lock of hair around her fingers. “Lonely if there’s no one there.”

“Merciful,” a boy said. He sat on the steep steps that led to his studio, blowing steam away from his coffee cup. His pants were covered in paint. His shirt was greasy from work, his hands blistered. “I haven’t seen her in ages.”

“Consumed,” a man said behind his desk at Flagpole. He wore an aqua sweater and an orange scarf. He took a quick breath of his inhaler. “I used to think she could be made happy.”

Purposefully absent they all agreed on. Everyone had been in some way privy to how Cora had redesigned her house. They had seen the empty white paint cans on their sides in the front yard, had watched her reupholster her furniture in her yard (to a dark beige) and they had all seen where she set the books in boxes on her front porch. A few had seen inside her house at night when the lights were on and the window shades weren’t drawn. It looked like a cell, simple. The living room had a monochromatic cleanliness to it. Cora began to dress in the same everyday: dark jeans and a white tank.

This ability to be simple, to be alone, was blamed on her new interests. For months Cora had taken to the bones, going into people’s backyards and behind the humane society to gather dead animals. She skinned them, and bleached the flesh away from the cartilage, and reattached their bones through a long string of wires. Then she wrote on top of their skulls and spines, things that crossed her mind, basic facts about herself. “I want to get to the bottom of everything,” she claimed, and so she did, often spending hours looking through a microscope in her basement. The editor of Flagpole had considered doing a piece on it, but found the animals, their figures bare yet fundamentally needy (dog bones posted with two paw in front as though they were begging for treats, cats posed licking a paw, tail curled in the air), to be a grotesque statement on love. “I preferred her work when it was optimistic. I preferred her paintings with the green backgrounds and the nude figures posed like flowers. I used to think that she thought optimistically about the future,” he had said to whoever his waiter was when the weather was nice enough for him to brave going outside in spite of the condition of his lungs.

Some had said that the guilt had spread through her fingers, to her face, and finally her mind. Talking to her involved a lot of long stares, pauses, pointed sentences. She was one of the few people who lived full-time in town who could walk through the streets without another person yelling their name, or running through the traffic to tap them on the back. It was as though people were afraid that she could spread the guilt, the stink of the animal’s dead bodies, their stiff, wide, white eyes, to them.

Everyone was afraid except Harry. No one knew the extent to which Cora appreciated him. Harry was a man with no qualms about picking up dead animals for a few extra dollars, someone who had a stomach for the kind of work that she was interested in doing. Cora wasn’t good at locating the dead animal bodies, which was how she had come to know Harry, who would do anything for about forty dollars. Harry might have been a part of the dirt, might have been something already decayed. His body was
so skinny he constantly looked like he was sitting or standing in a twisted way, his face
was pale, his hair an unwashed, dirty blonde. Harry’s eyes were blue, but one could
barely tell because he constantly looked like he was falling asleep. ‘High Harry’ had a
problem with heroin, and (no one knew) Cora loved him so much it made her toes curl at
night to think of his face or his hands.

Harry had gained his nickname (“Hi, High Harry,” the kids yelled to him from
their porches, “High, High Harry. Hi, High Harry”) from a set of spasmodic shakes he
suffered through for a period of three days when he had drank two bottles of Robotussien
and downed half a bottle of Dexedrine. For the past year, however, Harry had focus. It
was a need he felt in his gut, simple in its consistency and outcome. He patrolled the back
alleys below Prince Avenue, where the neighborhood kids had taken to sitting near their
screen porch doors and selling drugs

Often they tried to talk him into getting more, things that he had been doing for
years since he found heroin: valium, speed, and someone once even tried to talk him into
Prozac. “You snort it,” the kid had said, while twisting his baseball cap around the top of
his head. “I did it last night.”

“Well, what happened?” Harry asked in expectation that the answer would justify
Harry’s own negative response.

“I don’t recall,” the boy said, blushing.

“Just that,” Harry pointed to the baggy of white powder. “Just that. Please.”

He would come to Cora’s house after he scored, dragging a black plastic bag with
him. She might delay him with a glass of water, or lemonade. She might put on a CD,
R.E.M. or Neutral Milk Hotel. After thirty minutes he would begin to shake, hug himself
feverishly. Eventually he would break and go into her bathroom. In a matter of minutes
he would be limp as a doll. Then, Cora would pull him onto the couch and put him into
positions. She might leave him upright and sit in his lap, wrap his arms around her. “I
love you,” she said, close to his ear. She would kiss his nick and bite his earlobes.
Sometimes she laid him on the floor and wrapped herself around his side like a warm
cocoon. By the time he would wake out of his daze, she would have him sitting back on
the couch.

“I must have been up late last night,” he would say, unaware of what happened.

“You just fell asleep for fifteen minutes or so,” she would say.

Three days ago when he came he was sweating. He owed too much money. He
said he wanted to quit. “You know me,” he said. “I know I’m better than this.
She said, “My mother called this morning. I have to go to my Aunt Joan’s soon.”
He sat on the couch. He bit his nails.

“I have a plan,” she said. She stood in front of him and put a hand on his head. “I
have a plan.”

She knew, looking at him shaking, chewing on his fingers, that he was going to
fall in love with her. All her practicing would make it perfect. It would be simple.

As Cora started the car, about to pull out of the parking garage, Harry met her eyes. “Hi,”
she whispered. “Feeling better?”

Harry closed his eyes, syllables were muttered from his lips. Something like,

“Soon.”
Cora eyed his lips again, thinking of pleasure, of a small house, of family.

Aunt Joan’s house stood at the end of Old Highway 29 in Hartwell, Georgia. Highway 29 curved out on a long stretch of land into the expanse of the lake until there was hardly any land at all, until on both sides of the paved road the murky surface of the water was clear behind each house. Joan’s was at the end of the road, the lake surrounded it by three sides, kept at a distance by a labyrinth of pines, ashes, willows, and oaks.

The house was large, sprawling four stories with porches hanging off of it from every angle, green domes topped with animals captured in rusting iron, and a tower rising through the center of the roof like a bird about to take off. The panel was green in parts, orange, and white in others. Windows jutted out like mutated elbows. Joan hadn’t been the only one responsible for the sight of the building. She had bought it with her husband, an executive at Cocoa-Cola who didn’t mind the two-hour drive into Atlanta since he had an apartment there to stay during the week. They had worked on expanding the house, adding rooms and railings, but it was in the apartment that Joan eventually learned he took young girls going through college, older secretaries, women he met at protests (*Since when had he become political?*) and others he met at music shows. The divorce had legally been easy enough, giving Joan more than enough money to live on, enough Cocoa Cola stock to get small diplomas at the end of each quarter, and the house itself. All that was more than five years ago, but Joan still stayed on in the small Georgia town. She was determined to stay after the divorce out of disgust at the pity her Michigan relatives threw at her from phone lines and the postal service. *Worse than scavengers,* Joan had said to Cora’s mother when the woman had offered her an airline ticket back to the sheer white of St. Ignace winters.

That part was easy for Cora to explain to Harry on the drive up. They passed pine trees that waved in the wind and cows that stood, confused, on the slanting red hills. They drove through dusty towns, the shop windows large, the paint flaking, the land razed and Cora’s voice filled the car. She felt that enough had to come out in the air so he wouldn’t be surprised, since he had promised to accompany her on the mission handed down from her mother (*Really, dear, Joan has been alone there long enough and could use some company while the renovations are going on*) thinking more about separating himself from heroin, about what it would feel like to be clean, to not owe so many people money. Cora batted her eyelashes, her voice grew softer and began offering coffee, ice cream, peanuts, the closer she got to the family secret. He did not know the truth about Joan, about the scars that ran the length of her arms and her Aunt’s new found aversion to aspirin, and this bothered Cora. Love meant that Cora had to prepare him for what she knew was in front of them. Love meant that Harry had to know everything that would come before their first (conscious) kiss. It also should be handled gently. A sign came along the edge of the highway. Cora put on her blinkers. “We’ll get coffee here. Harry.”

“Hmm? Coffee. I like – You know I like flavored ones best.”

Harry, with his own secret, struggled to keep from falling asleep. She didn’t know that during the night before the trip Harry had stitched several small bags into the pockets of his suitcase just in case something happened that had to be dealt with. (*A bird flying into a window. A strange sound at night. An upsetting image on TV. Too much lint stuck to his sweater.*) Love meant Harry had to give himself alternatives when things were up in the air.
They stopped for coffee at a gas station in Danielsville, about halfway through their hour and twenty minute drive, found a small, rusty bench that sat near an abandoned and collapsing building that had once been a small dry goods store, and fell into the seats. Harry was breathing easier, though his legs dragged under him. He smiled at the green Kudzu overtaking the bricks, the small brown birds that flew in and out.

Harry pointed to the shaking leaves. “If we waited long enough I bet I could catch one for you. Do you have a bird body yet?”

Cora smiled. *I love the shape of your hands and the point on your chin.*

“It’s not just that Aunt Joan is lonely,” she began as Harry took a few tentative sips of his coffee, and his eyes met a Robin flying in the low branches of the flowering tree in front of them.

“It’s never just loneliness,” he said, and she leaned into his shoulder to thank him for knowing.

No, it wasn’t just that she was lonely. There was something about living in the middle of the abandoned house, the house having lost all connection to dinner parties and, after the neighborhood women had tired of their visits with casseroles, to any other living body, that had set Joan searching for something to grip onto. The emptiness was too much for a woman who had twelve years with the pleasant distraction of a husband and married friends, who had been diverted by dinner parties and the smell of cologne from roaming through the house, wide-eyed with insomnia, her feet stiff from loneliness. After only three months of living like that, alone near the lake, Joan had given herself over to suicide with no reluctance, coyness, or coquetry. Gloom hung about her like cobwebs in corners. Her skin took the look of a washed out, tired sheet, and her light brown hair splayed this way and that, gray sprouting from her scalp like weeds, the ends splitting and fraying as she made no attempt to control it. The hair itself seemed to have given up growing as though it, too, accepted that she was already dead, and so, though she took no effort to get it cut, it hung about her shoulders and moved no further down her back.

Joan had tried drowning, but the white flowing wedding gown she had dressed herself in for her final act billowed around her like a raft and floated her back to the shore. She had tried slicing through her wrist, but in the end couldn’t decide on the design she should leave on her skin and so had left surface cuts that, though they bled and left a dried maroon swirl on her bathroom tile, had left her shaky, thirsty, and alive. Joan had gone through all sorts of techniques, the latest, only a month before, had involved a bottle of aspirin. Joan had been misinformed about the length of time it would take, believing that pills work in a matter of hours while, in actuality, an overdose of aspirin can take up to three days. She had foamed at the mouth to the point she had been unable to swallow the rest of her martini. Out of concern for the color of her lips at the funeral (*Who knows what foam will do to your skin if it sits there for three days?*) she had dialed the hospital, and found herself saved, again.

The last time Cora had seen Joan, her aunt was a woman who couldn’t manage to get out of bed. She had an array of headaches and dizzy spells that kept her in a near permanent bed state where she read any number of astrology and romance novels. Cora expected to see nothing different. The last trip, nearly a year ago, when she had been recovering from a broken heart and had gotten the idea to go hunting for animal carcasses. Cora had sat in the kitchen and watched the woods in the back of the house,
the trees blowing in the light breeze, the brown of the ground and the green of the leaves simplistic. For the first few days she had thought of her lover, the stiff dried paint on his jeans, the way she touched the his hips when they lay in bed together, his careless face staring out her bedroom window at the bushes and oaks. At the time it had seemed too complicated to name; there were his ears, his stubble, the crest of his chest, his fingers in her hair. But, in Aunt Joan’s, staring out the kitchen window, Cora felt that simplistic bones of their relationship, could see how it had supported itself, and how it had fallen on her. She saw the structure, she could see its essence. The leaves shook above the ground, they fluttered like birds after a bath. They were what they were, and that was that.

“That’s why we’re going up there,” Cora had said on the bench, “That’s why my mother wants us to go.” Harry thought about the white foam forming on Joan’s cracked lips as she kept sipping vodka from her glass, and he thought, back in the car, about the way her speckled hair must have shook back and forth as she saw the red lights of the ambulance approaching her driveway and he touched the bruises and hard scars that ran along his veins up and down both arms. His fingers moved along them, and he pursed his lips. It should be so simple. It should end so quickly.

The road darkened in front of them. The air between the trees turned purple; dark things moved through the leaves. Looking at Harry, Cora shivered, then smiled. She turned the radio on, then off, brought the coffee cup to her lips, realized it was empty, and so chewed the edges. In the recurring dream she had, Harry was off heroin, and they lived in a green meadow somewhere where the sun never set but hung in the sky, all orange and blue like a bruise. They were happy there, the noise of children drifting through the open rooms of their house. Though they limped a little, animals had come back, their flesh restored to their bodies, and they drank water out of Cora’s cupped hands. In the car, glancing at Harry in the half-formed dark, Cora loved him for the possibility that lived on his bones.

“You’ll have so much space at Aunt Joan’s.” she smiled at him. “She’ll probably spend a lot of time in bed. She won’t ask very many questions.”

Joan, like any other person, was impossible to be guessed-at properly. She watched them pull toward the driveway, watched the way their headlights stretched through the early dusk. Cicadas sung about her. She licked her lips trying to see Harry’s outline through the shadows of the trees that fell across the windshield. Her sweater dropped about her shoulder, revealing the black strap of her sundress, and Joan let it stay there.

Joan needed people to be with her, that much Cora’s mother had gotten correct. Since her last suicide attempt she had decided to take her doctor’s advice and began to throw herself into projects, puzzles, painting, and a remodeling of the house. Windows were torn down, tiles pulled up, blankets piled on top of old furniture, long glasses leaned against walls. In short, the house was half-wrapped in billowing, black garbage bags. Noises echoed through the bare structures. At night, in her bed, Joan would awaken suddenly swearing that an animal had sniffed her hair. Aunt Joan became terrified, couldn’t sleep, and wanted to praise the doctors for this to her sister. “Never felt more alive,” she said.

“I want someone there with you.”
“Well so do I,” Joan said, thinking her sister was also thinking of a lover. “It could only make things better.” Joan was, a week later, less than thrilled to hear about Cora’s imminent arrival, but a bit comforted to hear about Harry.

“A boyfriend?”

“Goodness, Joan, it’s impossible to tell these days. I haven’t known about anyone except that one, that artist one, a year ago. But you know how girls are. It’s impossible to know.”

Joan had heard, So possibly no.

Cora got out of the car first, slamming the door and stretching her arms over her head. Joan was halfway down the stairs and out into the driveway by the time Harry stood up and hung his chest over the open car door. “Hello! Hello!” Joan twittered, not feeling the least bit ashamed since she couldn’t see Cora’s eyes widen in the dark at the sight of Joan in a shiny, black sundress and a red sweater, loosely knitted to reveal the shape of her body underneath. “I have some fresh made ice cream for dessert! And some dinner. Some nice dinner.” Joan stood in front of Harry offering her hand as a hello.

“You look like you could use a good meal. I’ve got more than enough for you to sink your teeth into.”

There was no way to say sorry about the suicide attempt, so Cora attempted to do the next best thing. She consented to watch muted pornography and talk about love. They watched the bodies on the screen, two women and a man, strange silhouette, and all with dark, puffed out hair. Three jigsaw puzzles spread on the table in front of them, half-formed, the spare pieces littering the carpet. Harry, too numb from the drugs to show any expression, sat blank-faced in the recliner. Cora watched the skulls underneath the bronzed skin on screen, and Joan critiqued each move the lovers made as false, as able to be made better. “Genuine feelings feel better,” she said and giggled. Aunt Joan was a believer in the right person appearing unexpectedly, as though one met their soul mate always surrounded in a puff of smoke. Poof and there was love. She used her own cat as an example of this, the gratuitously fat animal lying across the sofa, taking more space than Joan herself. She pointed to it and announced that it had shown up at her doorway and there was nothing left to be done other than take it in.

“Was it sick?” Cora asked.

“Heavens no.”

“Do you find there are a lot of sick animals in the woods?”

“What a question,” Joan laughed and hit the armrest of Harry’s recliner. He made no motion. “There wasn’t anything wrong with Bruno. He just needed love.”

“Finding things that have reached the end of their journey is love. You can see what they are, what they’ve been,” Cora said. “Helping them get there is even better.” She looked at Harry, and then quickly looked back at the screen.

Harry said, “Love makes you happy.”

“I myself have always been fond of chocolate,” Joan said, “but I wouldn’t call that love.”

“Love makes you sick as well,” Cora said. Harry and her locked eyes.

“It isn’t simple,” Harry said, “Love isn’t simple.”

“Love can be overwhelming,” Joan said, “It can even be surprising, where it comes from.” She raised her eyebrows in Harry’s direction. “But we can’t fight it.”
“Everything is,” Cora said, gripping the sides of her black jeans, “Everything is simple when you look at it long enough.”

“I agree,” Joan said. She winked at Harry. “Everything is simple when you face it.”

“We only get one shot at love when everything is said and done. One shot. Life doesn’t go on forever,” Cora said.

“Life doesn’t go on forever,” Harry said. “We should be happy while we’re here. We should be safe. We should live our lives in the best possible way we can.”

_No use arguing,_ Harry thought. _She’ll never understand why I packed those bags. She’ll never understand what it’s like to love something and not be built to withstand it. She’ll never understand how I need to feel safe._

Cora thought, _When it’s out of his system he’ll be able to see how easy it is to love me._

Joan said, “I’ve got some lovely desert all made up for us. Peach cobbler and vanilla ice cream. You two are just going to die.” She laughed then, and ran a hand over one of the scars on her wrist.

Cora licked all of their spoons after desert then she sucked on oranges until they all went to bed, her teeth biting through the flesh to release the sugar. She fell asleep craving more, dreamed of a crawl space above the closet where Joan kept whipped cream cool in the warmer months. _Secrets are where we least expect them, but are easiest to reach,_ Joan said to her in the dream.

_I can’t find him, I can’t find Harry. He’s not here._ Cora cried, finding that Joan patted her on the arm, comforted her, and the cream slid down Cora’s cheek, puddled at her feet.

The first three days went by in a blur of confusion, sugar, and groaning. Cora took to the kitchen, baking cakes and setting out tea. She watched the deer move through the woods behind the house, sip on the lake, and disappear through the trees. She spiced her food with syrup the way others might add a bit of salt or pepper.

Harry was never alone, though he might have thought he had what passed for solitude. If Joan wasn’t opening the door, offering him juice or water, smiling and leaning over to engage him in silly childhood games of thumb war and patty cake he had forgotten long ago, then Cora watched him, silently, from a corner of the room, hiding her face in a doorframe, thinking over and over again, _Please please please work out. I want you to want._

Harry could think of nothing real. He set about each morning trying to measure how much to take that would prevent him from getting sick, but from which he wouldn’t get able to get off. He tried to remind himself of how expensive it was, how he had pawned anything he owned that was worth owning as he measured. Nothing worked. Instead, after the customary spoon and needle, he would spend the whole of the morning rolling around in his bed, moaning.

Joan would think, _Oh, poor dear; sick._

And Cora, with her spine pushed against the doorframe, _He loves me._

For Harry, the room took on the feel of a twisted fever dream. He saw the animals he had gathered, the squirrels with their half-crushed skulls, and the cats with puffed-out rib cages, swollen with sun-rot, walking about the floor, asking him if he wanted tea, if he
could feel better soon, if he knew what he wanted with his life. Then they would go under the bed, whispering to each other in their own language. *He only loves himself*, one might say in a high voice from under there. Others would laugh. For hours, Harry could hear the nails scratching the floor as they walked, could feel them rustling in the sheets next to him. He wanted to explain that it was his life to do with as he pleased, but they laughed at him again when the words wouldn’t come and he mumbled over his swollen tongue and they wouldn’t leave.

Cora tried to think about art, though again and again Joel was in her mind. *Love is everywhere.* In the afternoon, she hiked through the woods behind the house and down route 29. She found small skulls and twisted backbones, and birds with heads twisted under their wings in the dirt that ran along the edge of the lake.

When alone, she moved through the leaves, the red mud sticking to her shoes and the edge of her jeans, and she thought about what it had been like to see Harry for the first time. They had known each other for weeks, but she was always busy cutting away at what kept the bones hidden to take much of a notice of him. She had been at the table, cutting through a gray rabbit when he came into the basement through the cellar door with a small black bag full of bodies. She kept at it, carving through the stomach, past the fat and the muscle, to reveal the sharp-white gleam of the bone underneath.

He had said, *Their bones are so small.*

Cora had stopped what she was doing, laid down her scalpel, and turned to him. The bright lights made everything in their reach blizzard-blare, and his eyes had seemed steadfast not dull. She could see the shape of his skull under his hair, the way his shoulder bones sloped.

She had said, *That’s how it is when you get to the heart of the matter, the thing that holds it all together. Love. Hate. Hunger.*

Harry had touched his arm, knowing for himself how simple it was. He had nodded, not in disgust, not mentioning how gruesome it was to be that simple. He had said nothing, not a word to try to change her mind, not a word in support of the complexity of the human condition. In his silence, she wanted to believe he believed in her art as it was, that he could see the beauty of the world that way.

*His bones, his shape, his fingers.* She thought when alone, listening to the sound of the lake. *And what will happen next -*

Sometimes, in the afternoons, she wasn’t alone and was forced to think of other things. Harry might walk with her, as far down to the state park that stood before 29 moved away from the mainland. When Harry managed to make it out there with her, they would sit on the top of a picnic table and he would praise Joan, her goodness, how quick her fingers moved along the edges of the sheet to change them, how he enjoyed her cooking. Cora never stopped to say, *What about the cake? The tea?* She tried not to hear each praise as a reason why he wasn’t any closer to kissing her. She smiled, sweetly, found specific things that Harry’s praise hadn’t covered.

On the fourth day, they walked back slowly from the park, Harry’s energy picking up. He grabbed a stick and beat the tall grass with it, and Cora told him about an exhibition she had been invited to in Philadelphia. “We could see the Liberty Bell. We could go to a few museums. Or eat cheese steak.”
They were close to the back of Joan’s house when they saw it, above them, near the back door, lifting its head and letting out a series of short barks, like a small child’s screams. Other than the noise, the fawn didn’t look wrong, though it was skinny, and the black ticks near its eyes were visible from where they were. For a few seconds, the only thing that moved was its tail that flipped about its hind legs showing the white underside. Harry tapped Cora on the arm, and opened his mouth as though he was about to say something.

The fawn’s left leg twisted out from under it as it began to run, the knee bending out at a right angle away from the rest of its body, the rest of the legs trying to move faster to make up for it. The small head leaned forward.

Cora could see the red on one side of the broken knee. Something bad had happened to it not long ago.

“It must be hungry,” Harry said at last. He was confused as to whether or not it had been real. He thought he heard the high voice of the animals again, though he was not in bed anymore. He rubbed his eyes.

The sky was starting to set. There were no shadows. The shade from the trees was dark blue.

“I love you,” Cora said, looking at the empty space on top of the hill the fawn had disappeared from. “I love you, and it’s not simple or beautiful.”

Harry was distracted. His eyes scanned the windows at the back of the house. He thought about what was left in his last bag. Most definitely not enough to get off on if he spread it over two days like he had been planning to. But he needed -

“You’ll have to excuse me for a minute,” he said, walking towards the house.

“Just a minute. I’ll find you soon.”

Cora had no idea that a fawn could make such a noise. The cry stayed with her, in her stomach, as she looked for it. *Love is everywhere.* Joel’s scars had healed light pink. His breath smelled like a disease. She stayed outside for nearly half an hour, walking through the underbrush that surrounded the house, making a clucking noise with her tongue. She couldn’t think how else she might call to such an animal.

In the meantime, Joan heard the backdoor close, but only one person enter. She heard noise, something rummaging through Harry’s room, and then a silence. She waited, then paced in the living room. She took her sweater off, put it back on, ran her fingers through her hair (the result being just as it had been before she touched it, ends this way and that) and went downstairs.

She called his name softly, “Harry,” then a little louder, “Harry?” There was silence in his room, the door half open. It was dark.

“I heard you come in,” she said. “Are you alone?”

She brightened at the sight of Harry in the doorway, not put off by the slump of his body, how his head hung. “I,” he breathed in, “don’t feel well.”

“Of course you don’t,” Joan said, opening her arms, “Come here, dear. Come here.”

Harry hesitated in the doorway, then began walking, his body tilting this way and that, his head reeling, his feet shuffling. He careened into Joan, sending them both to the floor, her with a squeal of delight and an open mouth, as Cora opened the door.
Cora stood still, her breath caught, still ready to yell for help finding the fawn, but her eyes fell over their bodies, Joan too busy gasping and slurping kisses onto Harry’s cheek to notice her.

When Cora ran to the car she couldn’t feel her feet, but could see plainly the cottage in the meadow, the one surrounded by newly resurrected animals molding away, turning into a cramped, dusty one bedroom. The children’s coos morphed into moans, cries of hunger that rattled her bones. As she pulled the car to the end of the driveway, the fawn stood in front of it, its mouth open, its cry coming through the open windows. Love is right here.

Cora revved the engine knowing anything was possible, but only one thing was going to happen.
Here a thought so happy Ellen can laugh. Canopies. Arms. Commitment. Love. Flashlights. Though they had separate rooms, as children Ellen and her fraternal twin sister Mirka would share a bed because they wanted to train themselves for what married life might be like. It was exciting. One of them would walk across the hardwood hall barefoot, trying to make as little creeks as possible, one toe in front of the other, sliding more than walking, and the other would push the covers to the end of the bed when she saw her sister easing into her dark room. Ellen’s sheets were pink with small, silver birds stitched into them, her hair at that age a tender yellow like a newly bloomed daffodil. Mirka’s sheets were purple, dark like a bruise, her tangled hair so impossible to brush in the morning that their mother resorted to braids that gave her headaches.

In bed they would talk, giggle, Mirka made a loud snoring chortle in her throat, an imitation of their father, and Ellen scratched her legs so hard the entire bed shook. Their bodies were feather-light, their nightgowns went down to their shins and there puffed in a sprawl of white cotton. Ellen laughed at Mirka because she could only sleep on her back and seemed to take up the entire bed when her body went into that position. They were too young to know about sex, its consequences and attachments, so in the morning when they opened their eyes, saw the other’s chubby cheeks, kicked and kissed and tickled under the thick covers, and saw their mother in the doorway, still young and slim, they thought, This is what marriage is. Years later, the cheap, thin silver ring leaves an imprint on Ellen’s left ring finger as she grips the steering wheel. While parking her car in the late evening after filing and typing expense reports all day, Ellen sees the tall, lacy white flowers growing near her smallest boy, is reminded of the imprinted flowers on Mirka’s pajamas, and laughs at herself in the car.

“Mom? Mom?” The younger one is standing in front of the station wagon holding his gun that shoots small neon sponge-like things into people. His baby-fat stomach hangs over his bathing suit and he’s looking at her in surprise. The brown station wagon door is open and one of her legs is out of the car, its tan heel on the dirty, cracked driveway.

“Nothing, sweetie,” she says by way of explanation. “Is that new?” is meant to give him something else to think about.

It works. “Pow. Pow,” the little boy shoots her dead. Jim runs through the tall, dry, Kansas weeds that grow beside the house demonstrating how he can now crouch and hit things with his gun like a real hunter. It all has to do with the element of surprise, which, with his excited yelps and screams, would require a deaf animal. The older one, John, lets out a war cry and comes running from the backyard, also in nothing but a set of swim trunks, these so small rolls of flesh that form his butt cheeks are visible. John painted his face red with something, and his summer sweat streaks through it. He stops some twelve feet away from Jim and shots his toy arrow at his brother hard and fast. They revert to their own world again, baby garble and boundaries that she can’t follow. Everyone says she’s so lucky; children two years apart, one six, one four. They’ll be friends for life, she’s heard from people in her office, from Grandmother’s friends.

She’s moving through the side yard now. The boys run on ahead of her, then circle back, call each other’s names. The cicadas start in the weeds. The open windows of the brown ranch they live in leaks an earthy food smell, pot-roast and potatoes, and a
neighbor man waves at her with a spatula from in front of his grill. She wants to say to Tim, *I just remembered; without Mirka our marriage wouldn’t exist or perhaps It took years to get ready for your snoring*, and then tell the rest of the story: the smooth white sheets, the planned number of children, her mother’s pleased look in the morning (“At least your girls get along,” the people at church always said to her, “they’ll be there for each other”) and she wants Tim to laugh, say, *That’s what poor kids do for fun I guess*, and rub his hand in circles on her shoulder. When she gets to the brick patio the boys run to the furniture pushed to the other end of the yard where, under the umbrella, sitting on those blue cushioned chairs, it’s clear, even from the distance, that Tim is in the middle of telling Anne a story of his own, a clever one by the strain in his face and the jabs he’s giving the air. Anne smiles, nods, twirls the ice cubes in her glass, then takes a sip of it. (*What beautiful hands*, Ellen had told her the third time they met on the road outside the brown ranch house when Anne was hauling a basket full of laundry back to her car, *you’re designed to play the piano, not for anything as low as touching what we touch.*) Anne sees Ellen and smiles widely, Tim looks up and waves from across the yard.

“I’m just going to see what your Mom is cooking,” Ellen says to him, never once thinking of her own mother, dead for years.

“Come join us. Get yourself a drink.”

Ellen lets the screen door slam behind her, something Grandmother always tries to institute house rules against. Leaning over the oven, pot-roast and potatoes freshly steaming on top of it, oven mitts still on her hands, Grandmother spits out *Ellen* without turning around. The early evening settles shadows about the kitchen. A small cat clock nailed over the doorway into the dining room twists its whiskers to 6:25. Ellen leans on the counter, takes a hearty sip from her beer, stares at the people outside through the yellow ducks on the curtains over the sink.

“Did you get the peaches?” Grandmother isn’t looking at her, too busy bustling about the kitchen. Grandmother’s hands spoon gravy, pick out knives, then rearrange the beers in the yellow refrigerator after Ellen grabs one. It’s as though the old woman moves with eight hands, the tightly fitting jeans, the shining silver sequins, and maroon lipstick merely a distraction.

The beer can clicks open with a hiss.

“The peaches! I asked you to get peaches! The picnic is in two days. I wanted to bake you something nice for your anniversary party. The store was on your way home, on Walnut. You know I like to let them marinate in the sugar.” Grandmother sets a stack of plates clinking on the counter, lets out a low moan and rubs her lower back. “Getting old, getting old.”

“No.” Ellen turns from the window toward the voice. Standing on top of a kitchen chair, a small blonde doll tucked under her arm, Alice, barely three, crinkles her brow in Grandmother’s direction. “No, ow-ow.” Alice, Anne’s daughter, the bird-like child with Mirka’s face and an obstinate way of moving into adult conversations, smiles at them in a dare to react to her as though she were a human.

Ellen sets down her beer. “Alice,” she says (*I want to pick you up*). The child’s smile forms, joy glistens in her face.

She chants, “Up, up, up.”

Anne stands in the doorway behind Ellen, the screen door having already closed softly behind her.
A house of our own. It will never work that way, at least in Ellen’s mind. Time can never be that kind. Tim’s bright mouth and overwhelming cleverness will be sure to block the way from any serious kind of job, any income that is gained from more interaction with adults than children. He coaches middle school sports part-time, goes to KU to try to finish his degree. A few months ago, late February, he stopped promising that things were going to get better, that debt would end and they would move from his mother’s house, and she was grateful for the silence. They watched late-night Conan in two recliners in Grandmother’s living room and let someone else’s voice distract them, ate dinner letting Grandmother and the boys bubble about the day, and rewarded themselves by ritually going to a bar once a week to sit in a booth and quietly drink a beer. Between the long secretarial shifts, the two kids, and evening school Ellen didn’t want to think about being comfortable, the possibility of not having to do it all, of having her own home. Hope functioned as a threat.

Children. They appear, to Ellen, as if out of a field in the early evening, their already brown bodies bobbing outside of the sliding glass doors, their skin illuminated by the bug lamps that zap large, flying insects. First one, then another, a quick succession, and she’s sure to tell this to them at night, as their small bodies lie a few feet apart from each other in their narrow twin beds. The creation story, the one they ask for each night, the only thing they ask her for anymore. Tim gets the more interesting questions, How do the stars move? Why is the air blue? Where do you go during the day? Grandmother is asked for water and snacks. They boss Ellen; Mom, look at this, and she sees their collection of grasshoppers and earthworms collected all afternoon long and placed in a single shoebox.

In the dark with their small bodies lying next to her, moments of motherhood slip from her. Months, nearly half a year (January; Tim met Anne at the start of the semester) after Alice came to spend afternoons with them in addition to their own creation story she tells them Alice’s, how all through the pregnancy the little girl’s mother, Anne, craved clay and pickled pig skin, how the baby had come out blue and light as earthworms. Regardless of whether or not they believe these lies, the boys are fascinated enough to lie quiet, to listen how their stomach aches were caused by bumblebees let loose by a spell Anne had put on them.

Ellen’s own mother had been beautiful, with lustrous red hair, hazel eyes, and when she put Mirka and Ellen to sleep, sumptuously tucked their bodies into sheets, her silk shirt rumpling and rustling as she leaned over, Mirka and Ellen lay still to try to catch the sound of her heart. They didn’t want to miss anything their mother might do, and she tucked them in separately, spent time with each of them. As a mother, Ellen is less than adequate in this vein. She is acutely aware as she tried to lure Jim and John to sleep, she can not guess what they need and they aren’t listening to her. The boys have inherited Tim’s loud laughter, his uninhibited sense of humor. (Here’s another thing Ellen hopes won’t happen at the picnic: the boys have taken up Tim’s habit of burping loudly around food and laughing inconsolably.) They are as energetic, as ruthlessly social, and mobile, and loud. She can only hold them in quiet sitting at the edge of one of their beds with the sound of her voice telling grotesque stories of the start of their rotten existence in Lawrence. In the dark, like this, with their chest of drawers hidden, their sprawling
collection of toys blank, Ellen feels like they are a family floating in the clouds, somewhere far away, like the bumble bees she tells them about.

All this ends with the usual quickness. Tim opens the door to see if Ellen is ready to come out yet and the boys start grunting like pigs waiting for him to see them off to sleep a second time.

Love happens this way: past all forms of decency, with the smell of burnt sugar in the air, and the sickly stupor of people milling about the street close to the river as the sun goes down. Nothing else mattered, they were together. Here’s what can be said for sure about Ellen and Mirka’s mother: she was very beautiful and she loved their father very much. At least at first.

When Mother first started seeing father, she barely supported herself teaching a few students, whom she would see at their homes, playing three organs Sunday, and accompanying two adult choirs. She had pointed her finer to a map after Juilliard, landed on Savannah, and thought, Why not? And, Ellen has come to believe while living in Kansas, another Why not? in the Presbyterian church when Mother met a short man with a devouring smile and a shy cough at the end of each sentence. Why not? I’m lonely, and I’ve always wanted children. How shameless.

Back when Mother was still dressing up for Father she put on a long dress on Saturday evenings with white flowers on a red background and tied her hair back tight, as though they might go dancing. She wore flat shoes because father was so short and slowed down her walk so that they could move hand in hand down River Street and watch the sun go down over the water and listen to the people milling about them.

Back when she still dressed up she put on make-up lightly because no one has to overdo such things.

Back when she still dressed up she could cook in heels and throw a dinner party together in less than twenty minutes, and these weren’t the most important things about her.

Then they were married. Then they would lie in bed until the mid-afternoon, past all forms of decency. Then they were living in Athens, Georgia, a small one-bedroom, and books piled around the couch, and they didn’t have to go out often to know they would rather be spending time with each other, and Mother wasn’t yet trying to hide the fact that she read the New York Times, and she didn’t yet consider the fact that Father had supported Nixon and not apologized for it something to be simultaneously embarrassed and angry about. Then the cough changed to an elaborate clearing of the throat. Then father began to jab his fingers in the air, the excitement about politics and God too difficult to hold onto.

Even Ellen knows it is not enough to say that she is unhappy by merely feeling her failure with her children before tucking them into bed. There is something larger than that gone terribly wrong. Here is the small, ranch house with the finished basement: brown. And the grass in the field behind it: brown. (Is that any place for an anniversary party?) The inevitable self-improvement game after children taking place in the heart of the nation: Lawrence, Kansas, where Tim and Ellen try for a degree, a better paying line of work, where the trees sprout dark green leaves hang over the wide streets and the horizon looms large across the soft hills, and the tallest building for miles around was one of the
libraries on the campus. Here are friends who have known Tim from his earliest days, who meet Tim and Ellen at a bar once a week and laugh at his jokes. Here are two boys now, nearly the spitting image of Tim: blonde hair, and dark-green eyes. The Grandmother, who wears tight, washed out jeans and styles her graying hair into a puffed-out bob around her face, passes them sugar cookies under the dinner table. Tim disappears in early afternoon to spend time with his friends on Saturday.

Ellen thinks, considers it all the following afternoon. Screams in the living room. Shot gun noises from the television. Thought piranhas. They are a day from celebrating six years together. Mother, Father, Son, Son, Grandmother. The honeymoon was over long ago. Here’s how love happens, how time passes: Ellen’s sides thicken, Tim’s knees go bad. She spends Saturdays picking up stray neon guns from the lawn, and he buys small snack-cakes to eat when no one is with him. Here’s a brown ranch house, with large windows in the basement thanks to the hill it sits on, and lace curtains in the front rooms. The carpet shines white, despite the toys littering the floor, and downstairs everything is brown: the walls, the carpet, even the old fridge.

An exhale, a fog on the window, a prayer: Do not invite her. The afternoon moves across the upstairs living room rug illuminating small toys and juice boxes left on the coffee table. The boys pay no attention to Ellen’s figure draped in the curtains, pushed against the window. They circle around the couch, pushing toy tanks and trucks and honking at each other, the curtain feels soft against Ellen’s fingers, and, outside, Anne leans against her blue, beat-up two-door car. Tim stands in front of her with his arms crossed and the little girl, Alice, stands between them, interlacing her small arms around her mother’s legs like a bat trying to shield itself.

Anne, Anne, Anne. Pretty Anne. Thoughtful Anne. Intelligent Anne. The topic of every Tuesday date-night conversation Tim can contribute when the weather became warmer. Each week they walk the three blocks to the nearest bar to try to talk, alone, and purposefully before their friends arrive. But in the warmer weather the silence cracked and Tim’s mouth betrayed his unimaginative character. Outside of silence nothing but the ordinary slips from his lips: vitamins, movies, cell phone service, and, finally, and perhaps stretching his own ability to perceive goodness in people, Anne. They take education classes together, English education classes, and he updates Ellen about her life. Her apartment’s junk store style of found-elegance (Don’t think of Mirka; Do not miss Mirka; Don’t think of how she hated Tim); the stumbled-upon high-backed regal couches, shining green lamps, and record-players. Her range of jobs trying to make end’s meet: waitress, gardener, substitute teacher. The cherry-kissed, shining hardwood floor. The small bird-child’s rosy shirts, orange pacifiers, still unknown father.

In the front yard Anne tucks Alice into a car seat, the child’s mouth moving, forming small chirps of information that had happened to her throughout the day. Tim lets the screen door slam behind him and the older boy, John, lets out a scream of machine gun fire. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. The younger one, Jim, gives off an Indian war cry and begins a sacred dance.

“Standing there the whole time?” Tim tries to move through the living room, but the boys dance around him like excited warriors. He grunts in frustration.

“They’re your children. They never listen to me, anyway.”

Grandmother stands in the doorway leading to the kitchen. She is not paying attention to herself since she would never allow herself to consciously stand with her
arms crossed. Just the thought of leading someone to believe she’s unapproachable is enough to make her mumble “Bad manners.”

Ellen makes a few steps to follow Tim. “And Anne?” She says this because she knows she doesn’t have to ask with the guilty half-looks that Tim is giving her in his attempt to move away.

A look passes between Grandmother and Tim, a look of family, real blood, knowing.

“So,” Grandmother takes a deep breath in and swings her arms, an attempt at friendliness that comes off as a bumbling karate move, “I was going to drive out to the store, get those peaches, pick up some more things for the party.”

“Pixie sticks! Pixie sticks!” The boys jump around the woman, clapping their hands and grinning wildly at each other.

Companionship: it happens because you see someone else alone, and you don’t want to be. It was four o’clock in the afternoon, raining, foggy, gray, father was still at work, and mother said, “Put on your coats.”

They were six. Mirka and Ellen did precisely as they were told, buttoning their blue raincoats near the closet as Mother dragged three black suitcases down the stairs. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Mother wore jeans. Mother said, “Sit in the back.”

The bus station in Athens, Georgia was dark, no way to see through its front windows, and even from the car the few men standing outside of it, smoking cigarettes, felt menacing. Mother looked at them, and then into the dark door. A bus hummed from the other side of the building. “Mom, where are we going?” Ellen asked. Mirka poked her in the side, and slid a finger across her lips. Silence. There was no one walking on the streets, no one to tap on the windows as Mother began to cry, holding her head, rubbing her eyes, the eyeliner and mascara smirching her cheeks black, her plan broken. Even then it was obvious; There is nowhere to go with you two, and there’s no one here for me. Ellen slid her hand into Mirka’s, and Mirka wrapped one arm around Ellen’s shoulders.

They were home in time for dinner, and the two of them were happier, became better than sisters, something more deeply desired. By the spring they were making their own rules, games only they could understand. On the ride to the grocery store Ellen closes her eyes to see her sister kneeling on hot concrete, always doing the jobs Ellen did not have the capacity for, drawing lines with chalk. Here’s where we skip, here’s the stone. And the chanting, over and over in sing-song voices: What will happen on the road to ruin, on the road to ruin, on the road to ruin? They sang a future for each of their friends; devastation for all. Ellen sang, as she skipped through the squares, of disease and pestilence, children and empty cupboards while Mirka, all forgiving even at that age, foretold futures the characters were happy enough with, never knowing that their faults excluded them from something better.

Ellen thinks now: We had each other until I decided, Why not?
Ellen thinks: Why do I care if he’s with her?

This much can be said about Grandmother’s entertainment patterns: they are ornate battles of table-space. Sitting on a single table will be barbeque, side dishes, flowers, table-centers, candles, a large table-cloth, dessert, stacks of paper-plates, napkins, plastic-
wreathes regardless of how many people actually come out. At the store she piles in wreathes, cookies, vases, and pink candles. She even buys a new, heart shaped cake pan. “I want us to have fun tomorrow,” she smiles at Ellen. “Tell me something special that you want.

In the middle of the florescent-lit aisle, Ellen closes her eyes. She sees it; Anne outside with the rest of the men sipping on a beer while Ellen stands close to the grandmother in the kitchen, helping pull a cake out from the oven. She sees the barrage of items they own not clean and orderly, but spilling out onto the back yard, a few beer bottles crowding the middle of the table. The toys are scattered around, the boys are bossing other boys and girls into long lines of warrior racing. No. Please don’t see me like this.

“It’s just so nice of you to host it.” Ellen starts walking again. “Anne is such a nice girl. It’ll be good to have her there. She and Tim get on so nicely.”

“Why did you agree to take in her kid, to watch Alice during the day?” Grandmother stops in the middle of the aisle and stares in front of her while holding a candle holder near her chest as though she is defending against a hidden monster. Then she smiles, puts the glass gracefully on top of the bulging mass in the cart. “It certainly wasn’t about the money, if that’s what you’re thinking. I knew Anne couldn’t afford it. It is just so nice to have a balanced out house while you two are taking your classes and working.”

This means that it’s an obvious choice. Who wouldn’t want little Alice’s body around, light as it is, her voice soft and cheerful, moving through the house? She can’t be left alone. When faced with the choice between spending an afternoon inside making small cupcakes and talking about dolls or leaning in one of the cushioned chairs on the porch watching the boys scream excited gibberish at each other as they race through the weeds, taking Alice could hardly be called a difficult decision.

Trinkets to the left of her, and trinkets to the right. One of the wheels on the cart squeaks as they move through the aisle. Socks, grilling bits, soda, a table cloth with a flag printed on it. Everything gets piled into their cart. The florescent light of the ceiling surrounds Ellen’s body. She feels lighter. “Are you happy?” She asks Grandmother. The woman is holding a wreath made out of plastic hearts.

“What’s happiness,” Grandmother doesn’t move her eyes from the pinks and reds, “Compared with children? Compared with love? Family first,” she smiles at Ellen. “We need each other, even when it gets hard. God didn’t make us to be alone. That’s family, that’s love.” She holds two shining heart pillows at her. “Pink or red, dear?”

Ellen thinks of it, plays the moment again and again as she stares at Anne’s shoulders and watches her talk. Real love happens this way: after the anniversary cake was cut, after nearly a case of beer had been gone through, after the boys were busy playing a game of what they call chicken with their toy guns and their small friends between the weeds that grow in the field behind the house, Alice ran out into the road.

It was that simple, and that fast, and that inexplicable. Wasn’t she just right there? Alice moved through the adults with a small doll tucked under her arm, moved around them singing nonsense, child gibberish through her teeth, an effort at attention intoxicating in its stubborn dedication. Don’t leave me alone. Ellen watched her over a
wine glass, and then went to look for her a second later and she was toddling toward the road fast as a small snake, trucks and cars zooming by. Anne was across the yard, leaning close to Tim, nodding her head while he pointed at some imaginary opponent and made small jabs in the air. No one seemed to notice that the child was moving at a dangerous pace.

“Alice!” Ellen yelled the little girl’s name and a few of the adults looked at Ellen surprised at the disturbance of the monochromatic clatter of the party.

Then the grass. The wine glass was broken on the ground. The feeling: I’m moving so fast I’m going to trip.

Her shoulder. Ellen grabbed the little girl’s shoulder as a truck came barreling down the street.

She cried. For a few seconds Ellen stood at the edge of the property, the paper-mache thin skin of the girl heaving with each breath as Alice clung to Ellen with a grip that defied the logic of the rest of her body. Alice’s legs wrapped around her hips and she wailed, as though wishing her own body could move into the woman’s. “Mommy,” she whispered, and then louder, in a shrill voice, “Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy.”

It’s this word that Ellen thinks of as she stands near Anne. They’re hidden in the kitchen. Anne is shaking, breathing hard, her head in her hands, her lovely brown hair falling in front of her face. Like most near-death or near-catastrophes, it took very little time for it to go out of the picnic attendee’s minds. The drinking has resumed, from the open kitchen window Ellen can hear the conversation move farther away from how lovely Alice is. Anne spent the first few moments holding the small girl, moving around the circles of people with her, letting everyone touch her head and admonish her not to go so close to the road, before she went inside. Tim went over to the other children to lecture them on safety, on boundaries.

In the living room Alice holds up a small model sheep and makes a horse noise for it. *Mercy,* Ellen thinks. *We’re all so small.*

“It’s hard, being alone. I can’t be alone anymore. I can’t do this alone,” Anne is still heaving

Noises drift from outside. A small thumping sounds coming from the radio.

Grandmother laughs. The boys were scream. *It’s okay.* Ellen moves back from the kitchen window, leans on another part of the counter. Alice whinnies.

“You’re not alone. You just want to be in love.”

Anne groans, looks up at her, her. “So you understand.”

*We understand each other.*

Tim slams the screen door. “Are you okay? I’m here, the other kids are good. Are you okay?”

Anne sobs. Tim pulls her up to his level, rests her head against his collar bone.

*We understand each other.*

Wanting love is the initial sign of a morbid imagination. Ellen will be going back to something pure. As she leaves on the train, Ellen will want to remember Tim during the moment something beautiful happened, a moment that was stretched, distorted into love. They had been on the road for a few weeks, an extended honeymoon of youth and beauty. They watched the farmhouses take on a look of bewilderment: the porches began to sag, the fields became dusty in the thicker heat of the mid-west spring, somehow heavier
without the southern humidity. It was always someone else’s home, someone else’s bed and books and stove and fridge and armchair. They saw the horizon give way to large, green mountains, and then stormy fields littered with tall oak trees and blooming flowers. They saw the low country trees dripping with Spanish moss, bugs larger than their big toes worming their way through the walls of the cheap hotel rooms, the white flowers trailing from the trees in the Carolinas that covered the car from windshield to trunk in the early morning. Then, apartment-sitting in Pittsburgh it happened.

Mercy, yes; that was it. It was drizzling. His eyes were half closed, his laid across the red couch, a pair of light teal boxers on, the screen door open, a light, damp breeze moving in from the rain. The mattress smelled salty like a marsh, and she had pulled one of the white sheets off of it, tucked it around her, the ends flapping as she moved near the porch like a ghost with copious entrails. His love was violent. He’d left hand marks on her arms, small bruises around her breasts, and he seemed so shy, so empty, his body suddenly laid with potentials, his tendons future possibilities, and her mind fluttered into Why not? This is going to work out. Mercy, Ellen will think again when she closes her eyes on the train to see him still lying on the sofa, the maroon curtain twirling out from the window. We’re so very small.

It starts from the same place. Companionship: it’s mercy, devotion, and a continual possibility. No, Why not? No idea of the future.

Ellen will also play another moment over in her mind, something pure because it was starting. After Tim and Anne went back outside it was quiet in the house, and Alice, alone, still played with her toys in the cool of the early evening shadows in the living room. The little girl soothed a squabble between her stuffed animals (Mirka’s favorite childhood game) as Ellen moved near her, squatted down. Ellen watched Alice move her animals around on the couch, cooing to them. In the living room it was cool, and the noise from outside didn’t carry over. Even in the shadows, the happiness wafted off the girl like steam. Ellen leaned beside her, and was no longer surprised that the girl lets her put a hand on her back, that she even said, “These are mine, but you can play with them if you’d like.”

Here’s how surprises actually happen: someone starts to miss not the child but Ellen. It takes a little while. Tim gets wound up and starts telling a story about their trivia team. The grandmother gives the boys more cookies and chocolate milk to dunk them in. Ellen moved slow, picking up Alice, wrapping a blanket around her, and even packing a few things, but she’s long gone by the time someone thinks to miss her. She’s walking across the wooden floor of the Amtrak Station while Anne walks the length of the yard calling and calling Alice’s name and the boys reload their toy guns as she sinks into the soft, green, grass and night comes. Grass stains, Grandmother thinks.

Tim rubs circles into Anne’s back, coos softly in her ear. Her eyes meet his, an uxoriously long grip, a smile.

Peow-Pow, the boys yell at each other.

“Sleep well,” Ellen whispers to Alice, still wrapped inside her quilt, as the train departs the station and their few belongings float above their heads in a small compartment. The girl breathes softly, wraps her fingers around Ellen’s shirt. Better than mother and daughter. Better than family. Something more. From the window the landscape picks up speed, seems to float by unannounced. Ellen closes her eyes and
thinks of him as she wants to, the one before, the one sprawled on the couch in his boxers, the gentle hiss of rain in her ears, the floating empathy of other people’s things about to fling them to another destination.

Out of Pity: Summer, Winter 1998

It was ten when the last person left and nearly eleven when the mopping and prepping was done and they were free to turn off the lights, make sandwiches, start an ashcan out of one of the customer’s empty bottles of Coke. Now they will get to what they have been waiting for. It is an old story, nearly a year and a half, but Joni hasn’t heard it. Some nights she has to go home early to take care of her daughter, Carol. Still other evenings she makes a plate of left over sides and takes it to the alley behind Bongo Burger and feeds the town’s holy fool, Joel. He kneels on the dirty pavement, eats hastily. Crumbs stick to his beard. Joni watches, standing, near the door, then leaves for her home, quickly, never bothering to even button her jacket. Tonight the little girl is at Joni’s ex’s house and someone has been feeding Joel at the pizza restaurant on Broad so Joni is free to stay, drink beer, and hear what Alan has been gearing to tell since they had first got there.

It is December in Athens. The college students have all left, gone home to their parents and pets and childhood friends. An ice storm is on its way, a light fall moving over the town already, first rain and then snow, the sidewalks sparkling gray outside. During these late-night Bongo Burger takeovers, they choose a booth near the front window that overlooks Clayton Street and the dog, Brutus, lays on the floor beneath their feet, sometimes hits his tail against the pole causing a loud thud, thud, thud. On the street people move bar to bar, couples holding hands, girls walking in groups, other figures, sexless in their solitude and shadows. Alan leans his head against the glass, watches Joni move to the cooler and pick out three beers. His clothes are covered in paint and kitchen grease, his face haggard. “I was always afraid she would light herself on fire until the day she actually did. Then I was relieved.”

“You’re trying to tell yourself something,” Nick says from the other bench, “Relief isn’t love.”

“Young when to not suffer is,” Alan says.

Nick winces, leans back into the booth, and adjusts his thick, black-rimmed glasses. He thinks of one of his lovers, long ago, who wore a red dress to meet him at the front door of the house she shared with her sister. He thinks of her blue eyes, the width of her hips. He remembers the way he could hear her crying on the phone, a couple of breathy sighs, and the clear way her voice pronounced No when he had asked her about it.

Suffering.

Joni hears this from the other side of the room, where she’s managed to find the bottle opener, stuck in the wrong cabinet again. Suffering. The college kids in town know her as the one to go to when they need a job. Every semester one or two of them show up at the Bongo Burger looking ragged and hungry. Their shoes have holes in them, the girls have lines under their eyes, the boys don’t shave. Joni gets them a job washing dishes or prepping the food. They miss work with regularity, often giving the excuse of reading or exams or a messy love life. They don’t know shit about love and devotion. Joni babies them, helps change the ketchups and deliver food to their tables, but Nick is only mean. He yells at them to move faster, tosses pots into the sink to make points. I’m here to serve people out there, not you.

She’s only seen him be nice to her daughter, when the girl comes into the restaurant after school. Carol, Joni’s girl, is dark haired and, regardless of how many
times Joni brushes her hair, straightens her clothes, rumpled. She has the small, mistrustful eyes of a wounded animal. The girl is pale, thin-skinned like a bird. She comes into the Bongo Burger to sit in a corner table, coloring fairy princess dresses purple, black, red. Then, Nick will come out of the kitchen, towel tossed over one shoulder, and pull surprises out of his pockets: crayons, shiny stones, small packets of chocolate covered almonds. *She reminds me of someone I almost knew a long time ago, someone I should not have lost,* Nick told Joni the first time she caught him giving the little girl small offerings. He smiled to himself, watching Carol twist the ribbon off of the plastic dinosaur, remembering a summer when he had given what he could.

When Alan leans across the table and asks Nick, “Did you think Mirka smoked too much?” Nick grins into the darkened window; something in his chest flutters. He wants to reach out to Mirka, to tell her something, to watch her shoulders tense with pity.

Since Mirka burst into flame Alan’s mouth moves without him. Alan’s lips keep going. “Her hair always seemed too close to her face. When she lit her cigarettes I thought–”

“You should get yourself laid,” Nick says as he smiles at Joni, who brings another couple of beers out to the table. She shakes her head, *No luck here,* and leaves only Nick’s beer unopened. She wants to tell him *People only think of sex when they haven’t found something more important,* but doesn’t. Though she loves her daughter, the small clothes that the little girl leaves across her bedroom as she tries on the same ones over and over again each afternoon, Joni doesn’t want to be a liar. Joni’s bed is empty because of her, not the girl.

“Sex is what it takes,” Nick says. Alan moves to make room for Joni on his side of the booth. He looks out the window. Someone walks on the far side of the street, a hood pulled over their head. Failure reeks out of the body; eyes stay glued to the sidewalk, the shoulders sag. Nick is an indisputable expert on love. He has had some kind of girlfriend everyday since he was sixteen. Back when Mirka was still around it was Nick who filled the air with talk about the terrible things his lovers were doing. One girlfriend beat her head against the wall whenever he came back late. Another started building an actual wall between them during a fight, banged her thumb with a hammer, and had to be driven to the hospital. Nick believes touching skin is intimacy. He believes that another person is all it takes to not feel alone anymore. At least, he wants to. He says, “Another body will make you feel better, guaranteed.”

“I always thought she’d choose pills,” Joni says, patting Alan’s back. She thinks of the time before she managed to leave Ethan, the terrible feeling of waking up each morning, pregnant, on a mattress in what was supposed to be her daughter’s nursery. Another body had only made her feel worse. “She did well, you know, she didn’t leave a mess to clean up.”

“It wasn’t on purpose,” Alan says.

“Right.”

“We were happy,” Alan can see her move across the porch, hear the creaking boards as he knelted and tried to sketch. Mirka could never stand still; her hands moved like small birds tied to a pole. He never saw her pull a cigarette out of her bag or a pocket; they appeared between her lips.

“She would never do something like that on purpose. It was an accident.”
“Mirka was a pretty girl,” Nick says, smiling at Joni. Joni nods her head to him, watches him take a long gulp from his beer.

Mirka was only pretty in winter when the landscape got bare and the sky turned off-white and she wore a large black coat that her head seemed to float above. Even then, it was best to be far away from her. From there she seemed striking and sure of herself. No one could look at her up close. Perhaps she didn’t trust perception. She never drank (he gave it up too, when he moved in), didn’t make spicy food, dressed ‘buttoned-up’ (as Nick would say). Mirka slinked into the peripheral becoming a cloud of acid bright colors and dried hair. She only wore strange dresses she pulled out of thrift stores: orange, purple flowers, lace trimming on empire waists.

He invented ways to look at her directly. It was hard; she scuttled around the house searching for activities, something to do to feel productive. In the afternoons when they read newspapers and magazines on the porch, between pots of tea she would make, he would pull his paper down and tilt his head toward her. He might have been reading. When they played games, Connect Four or Risk, he got up to get a glass of water in order to watch her chin tilt toward the board as she considered her next move.

“It wasn’t on purpose,” Alan’s head rolls to the other side of his shoulders. He looks more lively, starts rubbing Brutus’s ears.

Nick shakes his head and stares into his beer. It wasn’t on purpose. He tells this to Ellen, to Lucy. It wasn’t on purpose. I never meant to hurt you. He sees Ellen’s red dress, feels the weight of her body move his mattress, sees Lucy’s dark hair and sad eyes, the hill behind her house, that night he tried to kiss her, the rain falling around them. No. It wasn’t on purpose.

Joni sips her beer, watches outside as two lovers clasp each other’s waists and run through the gray of the cold rain. Her daughter, Carol, runs with her dolls like that. Carol hooks her tiny arms around their hips, not under their armpits, and carries them so they face forward, with her. When Joni first saw her doing this she asked Don’t they need more support than that, sweetie?

The girl smiled at her. They need to see straight ahead, like me. Joni wanted to grab her daughter by the hips, pulls her close so they could feel the little girl’s eyelashes against her cheeks. I’m sorry, she wanted to say. I’m sorry that you can’t live with both your parents. Your life was supposed to be different. It wasn’t on purpose.

Alan smiles to himself, reaches under the table to rub Brutus’ ears. He’s stuck in a story that’s not coming out yet.

“She was pretty,” Nick smiles, faces Alan instead of Joni. Though the idea of a beautiful girl always gets his attention, Alan’s smirk, the way his fingers move the dogs bony head have it this time.

Though Alan’s aware he’s speaking by the way Nick and Joni’s expression contorts he can’t imagine how his muscles can move while another part of him is somewhere else, a late fall, feeling the way the sun moved over him on their porch, their house. They were happy.

Alan and Mirka shared a happy life and made sure never to touch. There was no need to explain the rule, at least not in words. Whenever he bent over to touch her, leaned too far in and let their shoulders tap she would start heaving like she was having an asthma attack. Sometimes it got so bad she stood on the couch waving her hands in front of her face counting, “One - One, two - One.” She had never recovered from her twin
sister, Ellen’s, disappearance years ago when Ellen had left with Tim, determined to find a more generous type of love than Mirka’s. Since then Mirka had found the idea of being in love distasteful, and made sure that he knew that she felt no kind of touching, emotional attachment for him. Her hair turned brittle, small streaks of gray appeared at the part, the bracelets she wore around her wrists rattled as she moved room to room dusting and arranging what had failed to sell in their second-hand store years ago.

In Alan’s mind, he and Mirka had all the benefits of married life though. They got a bunch of brochures advertising special vacations for married Christian couples to places they still couldn’t afford. They hung these on the fridge though, and sometimes he caught her looking at it.

They lived on Pulaski Street near the railroad tracks in a white house with green trim. The rooms were small, tall, and filled with clutter seen at junk stores. Mirka had one, at the corner of Clayton, but upon Ellen’s disappearance everything moved inside. The curtains stayed down most of the day. There were records, giant pink bowls filled with marbles, two wood-paneled, boxy TVs that didn’t work, ashtrays that spelled out Bahamas, and three brightly colored couches. Sam kept his room filled with his art supplies, splattered with paint, and smudged with charcoal. Mirka hung his pictures up, sometimes spending hours rearranging the walls. His wardrobe was full of her knitted creations: caps, sweaters, scarves, mittens, socks.

Their backyard, where there was once a garden, was a kudzu tavern. The vine grew down the hills and curled around dead trees and telephone polls. At night, they sat on their porch and the shapes looked like giant dinosaurs locked in a tar field and it seemed like Mirka and Alan were alone at the end of the world. Those nights he believed she smiled in the darkness next to him. Sometimes Alan sketched in pencil in the dark, apocalyptic haphazardly arched across the paper, small triangles and frightening mouths, because he knew he could not talk to her. I love you. I’m safe here. Mirka’s grief bit both their tongues. The swing creaked. Moths flew near the light. Mirka lit cigarette after cigarette, the bracelets jangling on her arm as she moved to ash.

Alan wanted to say It can blow away and be gone forever if you let it. On clear nights, from their porch, they could hear music shows and bars, things Alan had given up when he moved in with Mirka. He had been working at Bongo for over a year that summer, and did art when it pleased him with no thought to who might see it. Little was left of his life as he had lived it. Though his old house was a few minutes away, and though Joel and the Radishes still lived there and were his nearest neighbors, he didn’t see them. Joel kept to his ways, preached to people from curbs and bars, didn’t recognize Alan on the street. The Radishes still wore black t-shirts, black jeans, and red bandanas. They had adopted two dogs, Mary Lou and Susie Q., litter-mates told apart by the length of their coats. The dogs wore similarly colored bandanas, and ran behind the Radishes’ bikes. The crew of them, three boys and the two dogs, passed Mirka and Alan’s house daily.

Mary Lou and Susie Q. never went out with collars or leashes. At night they raised a dog army and half a dozen dogs of all different sizes would walk first on one sidewalk, then another, smelling around the abandoned warehouse across the street, and chasing small animals that wandered up from the kudzu tavern. It was July that summer when he saw a puppy with them, spotted brown, one ear standing up, the other down. Even in the dark he could see the animal’s ribcage as it moved with its head close to the
ground, smelling for any sign of food. Alan tried to call to it, out of pity. He stood on the steps and whistled. A few dogs stopped and looked at him, their tails unmoving.

*Their brains work differently out there,* Mirka told him from the swing, a cigarette dangling from her lips. *Nature takes over.*

That night Alan drew a terrible landscape in coal. A single tree grew, and animal eyes stared out of the bushes in the distance.

It was, of course, out of the question to walk with Mirka as she scuttled about the house, rearranging furniture or cooking dinner. Her legs seemed, to Alan, like two sticks he had once rubbed together in the woods when hoping to make a fire. Mirka would halt in a corner, pick apart the couch, move several books, and then just as quickly her entire body pivoted around and her face moved in another direction across the wooden floor.

He could only move with her when Mirka walked to her work, the bakery. It was brutal. Yes, brutal. Through a deal made with her boss, Mirka worked overnight, alone. Whatever was made sold as long as Mirka had made it, and Mirka could make more than three of her best bakers combined. So Mirka ran between the large ghastly ovens, the noise of their fans like airplanes, white flour sticking to her hair and the sweat on her forehead, the fluorescent lights blinking a terrible white over the entire room. She came out, each morning after she worked, looking albino and terrified of the sun.

They walked slow, twisted through streets, to get to the bakery. Each night before she worked, Mirka waited for Alan in the shadows of the alley behind Bongo Burger. They left together, Alan promising to return after she got to the bakery, and after her tight smile in Nick’s direction got lost in the night. Some nights she asked Alan questions about the customers. He liked the enthusiasm with which people ordered. Some people found peanut butter perfectly acceptable on a burger, others relish and spicy black bean sauce. She nodded the more he talked about other people, how they seemed to him. She held a small stick in her hand and beat it against trees.

*There’s a mouse behind the curtains again. Even if we don’t see it. I was moving the orange couch to be closer to the window. The tips of the curtains are nibbled through.*

“I spent twenty minutes in the middle of rush getting together two sandwiches for Joni’s little girl. She’ll only eat sandwiches now.”

*People need so much.*

The narrow streets of the town braided together into a long maze of brick-layered lumpy short cuts and alleyways. In the dark of that July small birds chirped from squatting bushes, and Alan pointed out the good colors he could still see on other people’s houses, taking his time on the ones that listed Mr. and Mrs. to congratulate their combined marital good taste. Insects hummed. The air smelled sweet with decay; flower petals littered lawns, the grass turned brown and dry.

Near the bakery, Alan stopped to drum his fingers on a mailbox. Mirka walked for a few feet, then turned to glare at him.

*Do you remember where we met?*”

“Yes.” He had recognized her a year earlier when he used to go to the empty warehouse’s parking lot to paint in the evening. On her porch, alone and reading a book or playing Connect Four, he thought she didn’t see him, or tried not to see him. That night when they met he saw she knew him. In an orange spring dusk she had called to him (*Hey! Hey. Hi*), and when he stood in front of her on the porch, his long pale arms at
his side and the cicadas humming about them, she said, *The best thing we can do is keep busy.*

It was the last time Alan thought about the long, cold nights with Cora drinking whiskey and watching *It’s a Wonderful Life* and creating something that was bound to fall apart. A part of Alan wanted to believe that Mirka seeing him was a compliment for his artistic ability. He said, *We change for the best with effort.*

That night, in front of the bakery, only a few weeks before Mirka lit herself on fire, Mirka smiled at him as she pulled her curly hair into a ponytail. Her thin arms looked dark, like someone else’s, against the fluorescent light slipping from the open door. “I haven’t changed and neither have you.”

Animal control found Brutus in a dumpster on the corner of Prince and Nathanalua. Upon seeing the puppy’s matted brown and white coat, mismatched ears, and sharp ribcage lying, in a daze on the street, breathing shallowly, its tongue sticking out, someone had the decency to take Brutus into their arms, walk a few feet, and lay his body on top of a pile of refuse. Alan learned all this at Bongo Burger, where Mirka came, holding a copy of *Flagpole*. Each week the paper ran a section with photos and details about animals waiting to be adopted at the local shelter. Mirka had the paper open to that page. Even, across the room, Alan could see the faces of dogs and cats staring, frightened and confused, into a camera.

He was delivering food to one of his tables when Mirka came in. A black bean burger for a girl in a white-knit hat, a turkey burger for a boy with a scraggily mustache, and a peanut butter-covered burger for a guy with a Nirvana t-shirt. The restaurant was slow. Alan had been entertaining his table with stories about Athens as he remembered it years ago, slipping them free soda refills. Joni sat at a table with her daughter. The girl explained brightly colored pictures. Nick stood a little apart from them, behind the counter in the kitchen doorway, a towel over his shoulder, his head nodding as the girl spoke in an excited whisper. “Here is a pony that eats grass, and here is a pony that only eats ice cream cake.”

Alan said, “It’s two o’clock.” He didn’t know how else to tell her it felt strange to see her in a place with people beside himself.

“I want ketchup,” the girl in the white-knit hat said, smiling at him.

“I want to know how the rest of the story goes,” the boy in the Nirvana shirt said, leaning against his hand. “She ran over the deer, right? She left Harry?”

*I found something that needs us,* Mirka said, at his elbow. Alan clenched his teeth.

“Or they got married. Women always choose poorly,” the boy with the mustache said.

The girl in the white-knit hat giggled, grabbed onto the other boy’s hand. He squeezed it back.

The boy in the Nirvana shirt smiled, asked, “Do you have mustard too? Dijon?”

“Tables are empty,” Alan said while walking to the door, Mirka right behind him.

“I’m going on break.”

Outside, he took the newspaper out of Mirka’s hand, followed her finger to the picture. Brutus, as he was then, had a stomach too big for the rest of his body. He was fed so much so fast his muscled weren’t developing as quick as his fat content was rising. One ear was up, the other down, and the ink of the paper smeared across his eyes and
mouth made the dog look coal-covered. He looked ragged and hard. He looked awful. Alan could feel his own mouth twisting.

_He is so small._ She knew that he had seen it.
He nodded and felt along his pockets and shirt for his pack of cigarettes.

_They say they found it in a garbage dump._

Allen nodded again, and stared across the street onto the darkened windows of what had been Mirka’s store. He saw their reflection in the glass, his dark shirt and her frazzled hair and neon purple dress. He smelled paint and sweat on his shirt and jeans and he hated himself at that moment.

_I feel like I know him already._

“Know what?”

_The dog. The puppy. I know what it’s thinking._

“I want a bone?”

He looked at her, and she was taking a drag of a cigarette he hadn’t seen her light._Don’t you see it in the picture? It’s just like us. It’s as pathetic and needy and weak as us._

He doesn’t remember her asking to see the dog, but he drove her to the shelter and sat with her in the small, concrete pad decorated in a blue sign _Visitor’s Center: Paw around with a new friend!_ The concrete pad was under a small, tin-roof awning and surrounded by a wire mesh fence. From a distance, in the building, they could hear the echoes of the large number of dogs barking, excitedly. Alan leaned against the fence, twisted his fingers around the wire. Mirka stood in the center of the pen, rocking back and forth on her heels. A large woman with a clipboard led the dog to the pen.

Despite his fat stomach shaking each time he walked, Brutus pulled the leash this way and that. He crammed his nose against the wire mesh on the opposite side of the walkway then against the pen as the woman unlocked the gate. “Let me know when you’re done with him,” she said in their direction, then walked away.

Brutus kept his head down, sniffed to one corner of the pen, then the other. When he saw Mirka standing in front of him his tail went straight, then side to side so fast from where Alan stood he could hear it thud against the dog’s thighs. He walked toward her, head tilted.

She clenched her fists, let out a soft squeal. While backing away she stumbled, and caught herself with her right hand. The dog also hit the ground, its round belly dragging against the concrete as it shied away from her, whimpering softly. They sat across the pen, eyeing each other. Brutus barked, picking his head up and holding it at the same inquisitive angle. He edged toward her. Mirka inched her hand along the floor until her thumb touched the dog’s lowered ear. Brutus kept his head against the concrete, whole body lowered, only his tail moving back and forth. She moved her thumb slowly like she was touching the ridges along a dead, dry leaf. When she stopped, Brutus licked her fingers. _Someone left him like this._

“Not like this —“ Alan was about to say worse, but thought better of it.

_We’re taking him home._
He nodded, staring at the dog.

_He’s our friend._

Another nod, but this time he watched his shoes.

At their house, while Mirka watched Brutus smell around their furniture, watched as he tried to jump onto the chairs, Alan went into his room. There, he drew a picture of
their house, all in black, animals moving in from the bushes. When Mirka started making
dinner, Brutus stood in front of his room. Alan stopped sketching long enough to shut the
door.

Alan stops talking long enough to take a long swig of the beer in front of him. Someone
runs in front of the Bongo Burger and slips on the ice. The ice comes down in long
streets, pattering on the roof, a gentle percussion on the sidewalk. They can hear the bars
around them, still playing music. I Will Survive plays next to them, or perhaps only
loudest. A group walk by, singing.

“You were that interested in what Carol said?” Joni tilts her head, shakes it.
Nick smiles, scratches the painted table. “She’s a good girl, your Carol.”
“She’ll leave eventually,” Joni says. The words come out too quick. She gets
embarrassed, feels her face grow red. “At some point she’ll grow up and leave.”
Nick holds her hand across the table. “It happens eventually, to everyone.”
She nods.
“It happened to me, but it was an accident,” Alan said.

She would never have maliciously set herself on fire. Alan’s sure of this. As much as he
hated the dog, he knows that she would never have wanted to leave it. She talked to
Brutus constantly in a tone so low he couldn’t understand what she was saying and the
animal followed her around, sitting on her toes when she found a chair.

In the evening they watched reruns of old game shows, The Price is Right and
Wheel of Fortune on one of the wood-paneled televisions, and turned three fans on full
blast to try to move the heat of a Georgia summer off them. Alan sat on one end of the
couch, a cold plate of green beans, potatoes, spinach and a biscuit in front of him. He
picked at his food, first with a fork, then with his fingers. The audience cheered. The blue
light from their television made the paintings on the wall, his paintings, glow like
kaleidoscopes, lengthening noses and casting shadows on houses. Mirka sat at the other
end of the couch, a half-finished sock on her lap, the metal knitting wires sparkling
against her purple dress. Brutus sat between them, his back leaning against Mirka’s side,
both of her hands on him. One rested on his stomach, the other on the thick fat of his
scruff:

It can blow away and be gone forever, if you let it. Mirka had understood what he
wanted to tell her, all those nights on the porch. Things changed around them. Brutus
grew awkwardly. At first his feet became twice their normal size, then his tail seemed to
triple its length. At night in the bakery he laid on the ground hitting its branch of a tail
against a table while chewing on a squeaky toy, a rubber bone. Mirka began making dog
treats, and animal-shaped cookies for the bakery. They sold out each day. The entire town
was animal crazy.

Their things no longer piled high on the floor. Shelves appeared. The windows,
one kept shaded and shut, were opened. Sunlight fell across their floor, she laughed
softly when he said, “The couches will fade.” He could leave something on a table, and, a
week later, it was still there, on the table in the corner of the room. Their furniture stayed
in the same place, and one night he laid belly-down on the floor to look under the couch.
Dust bunnies gathered there, clustering around the feet.
She was too busy to move about as she once had. Mirka took Brutus outside several times a day, washed him in the bathtub once a week, fed him, groomed him, tried to teach him tricks on the cool of the kitchen linoleum, because, as she said, *Who can learn anything in this kind of heat?* And they couldn’t leave without the dog. They took it to wash their clothes. Mirka stood near the drier, pulling on piece of cloth out at a time, folding it against her stomach. Brutus lay at her feet, raising his head each time someone new came in, but never bothering to walk towards them. Alan sat at one of the plastic chairs, his head in the direction of the Spanish soap opera muted on the stand.

Mirka said, *Ellen is happy.*

“She probably still wears those heels.”

*I imagine she is happy.*

“Tim never struck me as someone who could age well.”

*She probably has children. She has to be happy.*

Despite all the changes, all the strange movements, the way Mirka laughed when Brutus rolled onto his back and sighed heavily, Alan could get no closer to her. Mirka was as untouchable as ever except she was touching things. She picked up the dog and rubbed her face against the top of its head. She fed it treats straight from her hand and laughed when the dog licked her fingers clean. When Alan came close to her, in the kitchen or the living room, she backed up so fast she hit counters and bookshelves, making things rattle. At night she left each door in the house open. She slept next to the dog and Alan slept in his same place, the futon on the floor in the second bedroom.

Alan spent a week in his locked room drinking whiskey and drawing an imitation of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, then painting it over with watercolors. Every few hours he could see Mirka’s shoes, the ugly gray and black ones, stand in front of his doorway, but they always left after a few minutes. She didn’t disturb him. He didn’t want her to see him drink because it *should* have taken less time to do the painting, *would* if he were sober. He spent some time crouching on the floor, head in hands, trying to regain balance. When he did paint, he threw the color down in angry, wet strokes. In the original painting, Diego Velázquez painted himself into the work, his figure in the background painting a portrait of Margaret Theresa, Infanta of Spain and future Empress of the Holy Roman Empire. All eyes look outward, as though someone entered the room, catching them by surprise. Alan kept the placement of the figures. He painted Mirka as the Infanta, though he changed her hair, altering it from a dull brown into a glowing red, its height and intensity shining like a halo. Brutus lay at her feet, though his eyes became human, round and shy, surprised at his good fortune. Alan painted himself in the place of Velázquez with an animal snout, beady eyes, and a claw grappling the brush. His eyes look at Mirka, and Mirka stands tall in the center, staring ahead like she knows who has come in to see her.

Mirka leaned it against a wall, and backed up a few steps to look at it. Her head tilted. She smiled at him. *You’ve been using your time wisely.*

Then, Brutus was at her hand, whimpering to go out, tail thrashing through the air. *We’ll hang it when I get back.* They walked from Pulaski Street, the length of Boulevard, and back each day. On the tree-lined street they saw other dog-walkers, women younger than Mirka, men old as Mirka and Alan together. Brutus smelled the other dogs, barked, and the animals circled around each other. Mirka and the other walker
talked of how to care for them: toys, parks, leashes, treats, dental care. Alan had gone with them before, but after two trips of kicking the dirt, waiting for Mirka to meet his eyes he had stayed home to paint, or went into Bongo early so he wouldn’t have to see her when she came back, smiling, breathless, a leaf or two caught in her hair. He didn’t want to hear her say, *Gentle. Gentle* as Brutus ran into the kitchen. Alan didn’t want to hear the way the dog slurped his water, how Mirka sighed when she put her bag down, the squeak of her shoes as she stood over him.

He went to Bongo when she left for the walk, not bothering to push the painting further against the wall to ensure Brutus wouldn’t knock it over or, worse, try to hide under it. On the third day the painting leaned against the wall, Alan brought a new bottle of whiskey and drank it at Bongo Burger. He spent his shift mixing ginger ale and bourbon near the dishwashing pit, often sitting at tables to talk with customers longer than necessary to tell a story, getting yelled at by Nick for it. After work, he went to a bar instead of staying with Joni and Nick. At the red-walled bar on Clayton, he ordered a beer. The bartender, a blonde, gum-smacking woman laid it in front of him on white napkins, said, “It’s been awhile.” She went to the other end where a few boys stood against the bar, their shirts dirty, their hair long and beaded. The bartender smiled at Alan. The room looked the same. Near the door, someone turned on the jukebox. The television over the bar ran the sports highlight for an earlier game. Outside, groups of people huddled around metal tables, tall umbrellas hiding them from streetlights. For a few minutes he gripped the dark wood at the bar, expecting someone to slide into the seat next to him, to grip his arm, ask him what he’d been doing lately. *It can blow away and be gone forever.* Alan laughed, rubbed his jaw. It was a touchdown on the television. He sipped the beer, the cold, sour taste filling his mouth. “Mary Anne,” he said to the bartender, “You still keep that nut mix? The one with the almonds and pretzels?”

He got back to the house late, had to wrestle with his key in the doorknob. Inside, things were still. A train blew, moving down the track slowly. A freight. He took off his shoes, and crawled onto his mattress. Outside cicadas chirped. A breeze rang the wind chime. He woke when the sky was blue. Brutus was in his room, on the mattress, licking his fingers.

Turns out there were lots of ways for people to leave you. Like Ellen, they could go quick, pack their bags in the afternoon, be gone before you think to ask them what they want for dinner. Like the Radishes, they could make it known they were never yours to begin with, stick to each other like thorns on cloth. Or, like Brutus himself, something could point them in a different direction, though they’ll stay close enough to remind you they’re not yours any longer. The dog wiggled when Alan came home, ran to him and jumped onto his legs. Brutus whined for his return when he left. At night, before Mirka’s shift, they walked the streets in silence, the dog wagging its tail and whining at Alan’s side. During these walks, Alan could never see Mirka directly anymore. Sometimes when a streetlight threw the shadows from her face he could see her jaw locked into a grimace, but then she turned further from his peripheral vision. Her hair became drier. Her clothes stank of cigarettes. His stank of alcohol.

Alan started to pour his whiskey into twenty ounce Coke bottles with screw-on tops. His work was sloppy, at Bongo and in his room on the canvas. He stayed late at the
Clayton street bar, touching Mary Anne’s elbows, the other hand wrapped around a beer. Brutus became friendlier. After the bar, Brutus stood over the futon licking his face.

One afternoon Alan closed the door to his room and opened a bottle of wine. He kneeled on the floor, drew himself laying on the floor, hair growing out of his back, his human face coming undone with a look of shock, his fingers turning into claws. He painted the background yellow, the light surrounding his terrible, misshapen body. He moved slowly, taking time to stop, drink more, watch the shadows of the trees outside wave across the floor. He saw that his room was not what it once was. Sketches were pushed to the side. Books were closed, stacked neatly against the wall. Bottles were strewn everywhere, glistening in the late afternoon sun. It wasn’t a work space anymore. It was something else, something sinister. Still, he stayed.

The screen door slammed. Mirka said, Gentle. Gentle. Alan didn’t move, couldn’t pull himself away from adding more long streaks of red, more large flashes of yellow coming out of the walls and windows.

He was used to being left alone.

Then he heard the dog scratching at the door, yelping, and whining.

Allen couldn’t move fast enough to keep the door shut. It swung open, and Brutus bounced in, smelling along the floor before coming to Allen and licking his hands.

The dog couldn’t be shoved away. It had gotten too big.

“Get away,” he said. “I don’t want you. You’re not mine.”

He heard Mirka’s voice, a sharp, Brutus. Brutus, come.

In his head he saw the empty bottles stacked into the corners surrounding him. He saw the malignant smiles he had drawn over and over again staring from the walls.

The dog moved closer to Alan, its licking more desperate, its tail wagging so hard its whole body shook.

“Brutus.” This was louder. “Brutus.” This was softer.

“I’m sorry, Mirka,” he said as he wrestled the dog away. At that moment Alan wanted to say something to cover the whole mess: how he didn’t love the dog, how he drank, how he couldn’t love her enough, how he was overtaken by what he wanted. He wanted to say, You make me believe it can blow away and be gone forever. He wanted to believe she understood it all by what he did say.

“That dog - ” she broke off. He pushed Brutus down to get a look at her face. She clutched a cigarette and her eyes were empty. She laughed. “That dog is just as pathetic and needy as us.”

Alan stared at her mouth. As she finished speaking he noticed a blue line, a strange snake, moved along her skin, up from her cigarette around her hair and then down the other arm. The blue part of any fire is the hottest, and in less than five seconds there were long, twisted orange and red flames where Mirka stood.

Alan screamed. Brutus backed into a corner. He tried to dump what was left of the wine onto the fire, but by the time he picked up the bottle there was only a pile of ash.

A train went by. Its cry cracked the house.

In the dark of winter Brutus hears a group of people walk by, yelling and whistling into the falling ice, and barks twice. Nick still holds Joni’s hand. “We have to live with what we are.”

“No,” she says, “We have to live with what we’re capable of.”
Nick rubs his fingers over her open palm.

“It was an accident. It was all an accident,” Alan picks his head out of his hands. He sees the two of them, Joni and Nick, staring at each other. Their brains, at work on something else, move at a different speed than his. It’s as though they are in a different landscape, something wild and swollen with summer. Nick squeezes Joni’s hand. She smiles at him, wide and brave. Alan says, “Oh God.”

“Do you need someone to walk you home?” Nick asks Alan. Joni stands. She throws their paper baskets into the trash and pulls her coat off the counter. Nick stands to help her get her left arm in. She smiles at him.

“No, no.” Can it be gone forever? Can it go away? No. No. They will live with what they are.

“You need to take care of yourself,” Joni says to Alan. She kisses him on the cheek. “You can walk me home,” she says to Nick, and he nods.

“You sure you don’t need anything?” Nick asks.

“No, no, I’m good.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow. Yes.”

Under the table, Alan rubs the tip of Brutus’ ear, and waits for Nick to close the door. It can’t blow away and be gone forever. He wants a few more moments in the darkness to imagine Mirka waits for him in the alley, leans against the brick wall, her hair smooth in a pony-tail, her hands ready to start work.