Heart Shot: A Collection of Stories

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

Piper L.G. Daugharty

April 2016

© 2016 Piper L.G. Daugharty. All Rights Reserved.
This thesis titled
Heart Shot: A Collection of Stories

by
PIPER L.G. DAUGHARTY

has been approved for
the Department of English
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Patrick O’Keeffe
Assistant Professor of English

Robert Frank
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

DAUGHARTY, PIPER L.G., M.A., April 2016, English

Heart Short: A Collection of Stories

Director of Thesis: Patrick O’Keeffe

This work begins a book-length short story collection entitled *Heart Shot: A Collection of Stories*. At the center of the stories is Lou Moreno, his wife and children, and the wilderness of Alaska which the characters continually encounter. The collection explores memory and trauma, violence in domestic space, and women who are left home by rambling men.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echoes</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Jessalee Home</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settle Down</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollers and Hills</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Rights</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Dear Alaska,

You fucked me up and I still have to thank you for that. I remember the realization, a dawning. I remember the moment I first felt watched. I remember feeling all the eyes like it was sudden. Alaska, this was far away. And every time I come home I still feel a certain invisibility, a masking. The wild abuts my home, the roads, the sea, and the focus shifts away from me. This is my confession to you, Alaska, another thing I can never quite explain: you valued me in ways I have never been valued elsewhere. You kept me strong, you tanned my muscles as I grew into them, you kept me smiling as the boat skipped out to the fishing grounds. You shocked me back into my body upon re-entry, and I reclaimed it. You made me see the differences between the them and the us, and I can’t unsee.

———

This thesis will become a short story collection which centers itself on a male patriarchal figure in order to deconstruct it, to reveal a critique of hyper-masculine, “wilderness” culture which tends to also presume racist and sexist ideologies.

There are two options: either the man conquers the wilderness by colonizing it, civilizing it, and he embraces the “chaos” and turns it to “order.” Or, he dies. He fails. There are three moves to this story: first, a dichotomy between the civilized and the
uncivilized is built through intense dissatisfaction with the very world (oftentimes society) that privileges the individual man. Second: the man encounters the wilderness as a place without such rules. He grows beast-like. He tests the limits of his body (strength) and his mind (philosophy). Third: one of the two endings.

My work is attempting to be anti-celebratory, in a mode of direct opposition, a writing back. I am tired of the individual man conquering and using nature as the backdrop of a hero. Too often women serve as ‘acted-upon’ in the same way the land does in popular Alaska or even western narrative. Trinh Minh-ha seeks to de-center this built binary held between wild versus man, the body versus nature, the domestic versus landscape. There is no hierarchy, no binary, no dichotomy that is not constructed by western modes of thought.

What happens after the lone individual wild man returns home? What happens when he leaves? In fact, the stories which came bounding out of me were those of the women—strong and feminine, arrogant and kind, hopelessly complex, fighting to survive in a world where their voices are decentered, unheard, but certainly not domestic or tame. They are bounding off the page, rageful. They want to be told.

My backyards:

I imagine this reel in a slow black-and-white film, an inventory, and if it were to happen
in the dark it would belong in a horror movie. But I only go in the daytime, and with people, and we approach the bleached log cabins with a forced lightness in our voices. By summer the homesteads are flanked with pushki and alder saplings. Each year this growth encroaches more, although growing season is short. A rotting snow machine splinters the trail. Weeds sprout through the seat and through the steering wheel. Several outposts, an outhouse. We stand in the doorway of a home, as far as we’ll go, fearing a roof cave but a trespass, an inkling, a shame, embarrassed for the structures that couldn’t withstand time or our barren wildness. A failure to upkeep.


Exhibit A: The Dichotomy, The Juxtapose

“I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, more keenly all the time. I prefer the saddle to the streetcar…the obscure and difficult

1 Both excerpts from Into the Wild, Jon Krakaur
trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities.”

Mar. 28, 1914—Nov. 1934

“So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure.”

Feb. 12, 1968—August, 1992

A caller at 3:46 p.m. reported adults buying liquor for juveniles at a Sterling Highway store.

A caller at 6:05 p.m. reported a tricycle stolen from a Ben Walters Lane yard.

Several callers at 3:01 p.m. reported a man lying down in a Main Street parking lot. Police responded and found all was OK.²

² Excerpts from *The Homer News* Police Blotter
Dear Alaska,

Here I am, explaining you away again, like you are some mistake of an ex-boyfriend who I must make smaller in my speech while still reeling over the memory. It has become a compulsion, an apology, an embarrassment—that we still can’t quite get over each other already.

“Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on…to be the dwelling of man, we say,—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or to be buried in…It was a place of heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we…”

-Henry David Thoreau

A baby:

One St. Patrick’s day morning, still six or seven fresh feet of snow on the ground. Sun, though—the light was coming back. Double the sunburn on the hills where they lived and still live, with the bright white light refracting onto my mother’s face, pink with cold. The
only thing she wore of white was a t-shirt, non-cotton-blend. My father, wearing green suspenders, green khaki shorts, high green socks, and a green felt hat. A goddamn leprechaun. My mother’s belly starting to stretch out against her windbreaker. A spring wind, not frigid, just warm enough for a sweaty ski. They said, well, why not today? And they invited their two closest friends as witnesses, strapped on cross-country skis, and floated down the hill to a little spot right on the treeline. Overlooking the bay, the mountains. I know this place all too well, the abandoned homesteads overlooking the stretching blue of my home bay. I was there, after all.

This was not my mother’s first pregnancy, but it was the first she wanted to keep. She decided he was it, he had good genes, it was time. She said: you’re in or you’re out. This happens with most of the men that I know. The fathers. What they think they really want is a partner in crime to roam through the mountains with, to bike across the country, to work side-by-side in the garden or a fishing boat, to rip through snow berms on snow machines out to the hand-sawn hand-clipped hand-nailed cabin by the lake, to fish the river with on summer mornings so ripe with pink air. They do want that. “They are never ready,” she tells me now.

Exhibit B: The Encounter

“Here he was powerless, nobody to control, nobody to blame. Every action worked
against him and hurt him. A bitter loneliness swept over him as tears clouded his vision. He felt so small here, puked up on a remote forgotten shore and left to die. Was this how the world was going to get rid of him?”

“I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has just begun.”

———

A caller at 5:47 p.m. reported a family member acted out of character and also had a history of suicide. Police and harbor officers were to be on the lookout for the person at the harbor.

A caller at 2:25 a.m. reported someone throwing a flare around in the road on Pioneer Avenue. Police responded and the flare was extinguished.

A caller at 5:39 p.m. reported a moose calf limping near traffic on Pioneer Avenue.

———

Dear Alaska,

You made my childhood beautiful and tragic, the way you provided and then slowly took away. How could so much blood spilled be such an indication of our living?

———

3 from *Touching Spirit Bear*, Ben Mikaelsen
4 from Christopher McCandless’s journals, *Into the Wild*
Dropping the anchor on the bow I was in awe of you. I watched it whirl down, the river of the ocean whisking it away like a feather. That could be me, I could crush to the bottom and push out all the air. I could never be like the fish I loved so dearly. I do not have gills, my greatest failure. You could do that with the swiftest motion of a wave. I would be helpless to you.

And plucking the guts out of those same fish, tasting each one carefully. This, and this, and this. A liver? I lick it. An eyeball? A crunchy pop, black ink all over my chin. And casting in the driveway to snag pinecones and spruce needles until I was ready for the river. That first fish that gasped and I would never find the same rush. She was the one that everybody clapped for after my little-girl body could barely lift her. My arms were so numb. I learned early that many things are bigger than I am and how to be afraid.

“Nature was not a power with which one could establish a celebratory, reverential relationship. On the contrary, it was a power from which one sought deliverance. Nature had to be subdued, controlled, and put to better use by man’s effort.”

—Ziauddin Sardar

Christmas:
The babies were still babies. A snowstorm. The way the six-person plane lifted and then dove, spun, then landed on the rocky beach as faces of the native village made their way
towards us. The pilot laughing at my grandmother’s reaction. Two room house and all my relatives. Sledding on cookie sheets. The gym was the only place where everyone fit, where everyone could go, where everyone went. When we snow machined out on the lake it was not my first frostbite. But my uncle, a wide body, his sled went in at the edges.

Where, later, we drive by on the charter boat, chopping through the waves and spray. I ride out back, daring the cold to seep through to my chest, listening for stories I don’t remember about that Christmas. Like the adoption of the teenager from the village, when they tried to make a better life for her—like how good she was at basketball, when she beat my older cousin, how I thought that was so cool because she was a girl. The village passes me on my right side on the way out, on the left when we drive back in for the day. I haven’t been there since that Christmas, when my aunt and uncle taught at the school. That girl has six children, now, her husband the drug dealer of the village, one of the only ones who can actually provide for six kids. She says she keeps having them to keep him around. I keep thinking: where would he go.

A person at 8:09 p.m. reported a disturbance at a Main Street home. Police responded and arrested a 50-year-old man on three counts of assault and drug misconduct.
A caller at 2:35 p.m. reported suspicious vehicles near West Homer Elementary School.

A caller at 10:58 a.m. reported a woman staggering in the road on Main Street. Police responded but could not find the woman.

```

```

“Twilight; two lights. Two countries; two worlds. It has always been difficult to determine where nature begins and where it ends. Especially when one recognizes oneself as being part of it. If night is lived within day, and day within night, then what is “natural” may be said to situate itself nowhere else than at the boundary of nature. The natural lies at the edge of nature and culture. Shifting from one realm, one context, one situation to another, its boundary challenges every definition of the ‘natural’ arrived at.”

-Trinh Minh-ha

Dear Alaska,

Do you know what you taught me about a man? Now a man, first of all, smells a very particular way. He smells, first, like air—the wild kind. It is the kind of air that they rush off to so they can find their limits. Sweat is a sweet smell on the clothes of a man. Not cotton. Cotton kills. Everybody knows that. There is a smell that happens to wool

```

```
once it has been outside for long enough. A snow smell, but also a used-up smell that never runs out. Alaska, you taught me to love rambling men, the men that leave for the call of the sea or the mountains or the fish or the job. You taught me to love that distance. I prefer them to be gone. The sweet comeback, the taste of familiar/unfamiliar lips, the body a bit stronger, a bit distant. Always the call of leaving, a threat and an invitation.

Go.

———

A caller at 6:23 a.m. reported an unattended skiff in the harbor.

A caller at 8:55 a.m. reported an abandoned car with a dog inside barking that was parked on Bunnell Avenue.

A person at 1:07 p.m. made a 911 call of a child left in a car at a Sterling Highway parking lot.

———

“The further from the (men’s) mind and the closer to nature the object of desire acquired abroad is, the more likely it is to provide compensation for these men’s alienation from nature in their culture.”

-Trinh Minh-ha
Exhibit C: The Conquer (or) The Downfall

“These old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone.” 5

“S.O.S I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me.” 6

A caller at 5:43 p.m. reported a driver spinning brodies in a Fairview Avenue parking lot. Police contacted the driver and warned the person of unsafe driving. Police also contacted the driver’s mother.

Several people at 5:35 p.m. made 911 calls of a man falling in the road on Heath Street. Police contacted the man and provided him transportation to another place.

Several callers at 5:46 p.m. reported two cars hit a moose near Mile 2.5 East End Road. Police responded and called a tow truck and a charity to salvage the moose meat.

5 from London’s *Call of the Wild*  
6 Krakaur, again.
“a sign to unsettle itself and to break loose from its fixed representation… a gray zone.”

—Trinh Minh-ha

A memory:

When they tell me I’m going to have a brother, and they’re going to name him Quinn, I imagine that they will be bringing me a sequin. When they say he will be a baby, I imagine the sequin will be blue and sparkly—a small bead that I can paste onto something like a project, a coloring. I am delighted by this. When they tell me I’m going to be a sister, my father and I leave my mother at home. My father must be feeling something close to silence—a cotton muffling around his ears, like when you sit in a snow cave and the rest of the world moves along without you. He tells me now: I always wanted kids! Adamant. But he leaves me at my grandparents house in the city and runs away to the mountains, a long trip ahead, the Wild calling in the most deafening way. And I still hate to use the word “nature” or “wilderness,” those sounds make me cringe. I don’t understand how all the things must be separated. But I do recognize the call.

But the labor is early and he comes streaming back, picking me up, zinging me home on an airplane. We zing home and get back to our house in the woods. As he’s tucking me
into bed we hear a sound: a scratching, an itching. The first night: a bat in the chimney. It comes at me. Blackening. I don’t scream. I pet the bat on the back of his black shiny head. My father opens the door and out the bat flies, disappearing into sunny night air. The next night, the scratching returns. The second night: a wood duck. Wedged in there. As soon as we open the floor, down it squawks, into the warm walls and the everlasting light of summer, hitting the windows and scratching the walls. He captures it with a towel in his big hands. He lets me pet it on the head, the beak. We marvel at how, when the boy was coming, things kept getting inside the house. Because of the chimney fire of the months, we never got around to putting the cap on the top of the smokestack. But two nights in row?

Then the Sequin comes.

———

A caller at 12:05 a.m. reported men with open containers and drinking in a car parked at a Pioneer Avenue lot. Police responded. The men agreed to leave in a cab.

A caller at 2:40 p.m. reported abandoned puppies at a Grubstake Avenue address. Police responded but could not find the puppies.
A caller at 12:17 a.m. asked police to make a welfare check on a person who made suicidal statements on social media. Police spoke to the person and determined all was OK.

A scene on loop:

I am elbow deep in the fish hold, shredding my hands through the sliming bodies of halibut, when they get cold and stiff with rigor. The slime makes patterns on their green skin when the blood leaves them. As I am kneeling, digging, the clients watching from above, a man from Texas or the midwest might say, “That what you do to all your boyfriends?” When I slit the gills with my filet knife clean and smooth and efficient, (as I coo to my fish with loving tones, for death is a ceremony, a thanksgiving, a celebration of sacrifice) a man from Minnesota might say, “I hope you don’t do that to everybody you love.” I can only roll my eyes at that. And a man who moved to Alaska from Washington might say something like, “Wow, you are really going to make some man so happy someday.” And this is celebratory, reverence, I know it is. I am supposed to feel good. That is a compliment. And when my captain, who knows me better than anyone, responds with, “Piper will never get married. No, she’ll end up alone. No man will ever be good enough,” I know he’s joking and I wonder if he speaks some truth. Never have I ever met a man who smelled the right way, who responded the right way to my slitting of
gills and loving caresses, who didn’t flinch. But then the Alaskan man on the boat might speak up, and if he does he will say: “Don’t you listen to them. Real men,” he says, “real men will make you carry double. He’ll want your strength. He’ll give you half the meat of an animal and make you carry that out and he’ll love you for that.”

———

Alaska,

You just always have to complicate this, don’t you?

The classic misunderstanding between these men is that they do not always see me as having a place in the wild. I am a woman, after all.

Within Western, American myth, male authors maintain a separation between the domestic and wild. They are set in opposition to one another: civilized versus uncivilized. How are these portrayed, then, to reveal the spaces which certain bodies take up? In fact, we see the spaces deemed as domestic as required of safety, womb-like—when they are often most fraught with trauma and violence. We expect to fear the wilderness, the chaos, because it does not follow the rules our society has so carefully set up. Men come to the wild and are so surprised when they discover exaltation—inspiration—that they can’t be themselves, truly, in the hustle and bustle of civilized expectation. But in that discovery, the wild becomes usable, a commodity, a fetish.

If I can remember vividly the first moments my own body was being objectified, the first time I felt visible, the first time I wanted to hide from gazing eyes, then Alaska,
how can I keep from seeing you as a *sister*? A body conquered, used up, discarded? But only once their narrative has played out—only for the sake of the hero of the story. What is left behind? Who is left behind?

“Nature is pre culture and it is also subculture.”

“But reality is dichotomized, set into binary opposition, and dramatized in their contrast.”

—Trinh Minh-ha

Two backyards:

One. A house wedged behind another house because M’s parents co-owned the property but could not live under one roof. She and I, back and forth, years and years, daycare and then dress-up and then pre-teens perched on her father’s roof. Back in the woods wedged in the middle of town, but our own jungle gym: crab pots. Swinging over the rusting edges into the netted covers, telling secrets, smelling like Peach Barbie. I made myself comfortable in one, and she the other, and there we lay, looking up at the edges of blue sky peeking out between the pine tree tops. Salt smell. Red. Warm.

Two. J and R and me and Sequin, raspberries, slugs pulled from the garden and placed on their mother’s bed, an extensive dress-up box, chalk, a creek where we brewed our potions. One day their father drug home a wooden skiff, plopped it in the edge of the
yard. We will not become a junk yard, said their mother. One day he drug home buckets of paint, pinks and purples and yellows, brushes, pompoms, sequins. Splashing on the edge of the boat grew flowers, large red hearts, stars, our names. A scene of trees and buildings, blobs of white and blue all over. Splashed into the water—a photo: the two girls, their father, their dog. This would make up for him leaving every summer. They would eventually join him. Side by side, generational succession. Then they replace him.

A caller at 4:42 a.m. made a 911 call of being lost and cold. Police responded and provided transportation for the woman.

A caller at 10:45 p.m. reported hearing a chainsaw and seeing flashlights on the beach at Mariner Park. Police responded and warned people not to cut up logs in the berm and also issued a disorderly conduct warning.

A caller at 12:47 a.m. reported hearing a gunshot in the Main Street area. Police responded but could not find the source of the gunshot.
“The medieval fascination with the wild man was that he could potentially exist within the bounds of Europe itself, within the individual himself as a lurking force, always threatening to overcome and destroy him. The wild man had therefore to be either civilized or sacrificed to civilization.”

—Ziauddin Sardar

Dear Alaska,

Here’s what you taught me about being a woman. That no matter what, she got it. That a rambling man leaving a good woman at home isn’t even worth talking about. That’s not the relationship, right? That’s not the community. It’s not like she’s home alone, no, she’s with the other women. Women strap babies on their backs as they mend nets, stoop to fix the engine-room leak, they push their legs hard into the ground on cross-country skis. My own mother pulling us home in a sled couched in our groceries for the week. Milk in my lap. Sequin silent in front of me, his snow-suited body wedged in between my legs. We couldn’t even see her in the darkness of 4pm, the beam of her flashlight the only reminder of her presence. Her voice calling out to us through the falling snow.

I have never had a second of doubt about who the stronger sex is.

What a shock upon my first entry to the real world, away from you. No wonder I romanticize you. No wonder you are my first true love. Never have I felt the eyes of the gaze or the subtle repression on my body the way I have away from you. You are my
freedom, my poison, the choice I will have to make someday.

One blue-sky summer day we came home to instant gray clouds. My mom called our closest neighbor down the road: *What is happening?* Everything, gray—the sky, the air. We are far away from safety, it seems, sometimes. Sequin was a toddler which meant I was young enough to find this apocalyptic trance more magical than scary. We squirmed outside. I had a mason jar in my hand.

Sequin sat on the grass and the bugs landed on his baby sweat suit, his arms, his chubby legs, his sweet cheeks. I flicked them off of him, angry for their intrusion. I swooped the mason jar into the air and filled the bottom of the jar with bugs. I clapped my hand over the lid and looked at them—little brown bodies smelling of poison spruce, climbing over each other to get to the top of the jar, and then I’d shake them back down. I could run my hand through the air and hit them, their bodies bombarding my own, a clash. I filled the jar with water, capped it, set it on the porch in the twenty-four hours of hot sun. I watched them die, slowly, and felt good.

That fall when the rain finally came we cleared all the brush. The woods smelled like diesel and sawdust, and I helped them yell “Timber!” and I didn’t cry. The fairy forest,
the shelter from the wind, the bodies that kept our snow drift from collapsing across the long driveway. It never dawns that once gone it’s gone forever. I couldn’t get lost in their largeness anymore. I would always be seen. The wind began.

Several people at 4:55 p.m. reported hearing a loud blast or fireworks noises at Bishop’s Beach.

A person at 3:07 p.m. made a 911 call of being verbally abused and threatened at a Lake Street address. Police responded and provided a person transportation away from the scene.

A caller at 4:03 a.m. reported a drunk person passed out on the sidewalk on Fireweed Ave. Police and medics responded and took the person to South Peninsula Hospital.

“Ambiguity offers a site where nature continues to resist hierarchized and linear categories. The prefixes pre-, sub-, and super- seems “hopelessly” irrelevant; so does the tendency incessantly to recenter “culture” and to revert to it as an organizing concept.”

——Trinh Minh-ha
A film:
Someone giggles, a student. The camera pans outside of the middle school window, pointing towards my father’s light baby-blue Toyota truck. A dark figure comes into focus as the camera adjusts. It is spring, snow still on the ground. A black bear sits perched on the tailgate of the truck, ripping apart the trash bags in the back. With fingers of long black nails, using pristine delicacy, he unwraps one of the Sequin’s diapers. He makes a meal of this, licking and licking, until the school gets bored and someone clicks the camera off.

A memory:
Our noses are pressed up to the windows of the high school, looking down at the pristine, snow-packed courtyard. Cops surround the building outside. A teacher shushes us, tells us to pay attention. Suddenly: a long, drawn-out whining, panting, animal panic. They tazed it, someone yells. The whining gets louder, more aggressive, someone shouts. We press our foreheads, trying to see below, where is the moose? the building in the way—and then a gun shot into the clear air. A ring of bright dark blood, a circle, seeps out to the edges of our vision. The snow remains tinted, even after the animal is removed.
Police at 3:36 p.m. found an injured bird on Kachemak Drive and contacted the appropriate agency.

A caller at 5:01 a.m. reported a Herndon Drive neighbor’s door ajar. Police responded and found wind had blown the door open. All was OK.

A person at 4:47 a.m. made a 911 call of a domestic dispute at a Soundview Avenue address. Police responded and arrested a 53-year-old man on two counts of domestic violence.

Dear Alaska,

You are a pocket of air, the freshest of streams and oxygen I forgot could be so clear and clean. Upon re-entry my lungs are shocked at your infusion of life. You are forgetting my body, remembering it, reclaiming it. You are losing myself in the woods, a place I could never get lost. You are humbling, shaping us. You are the snap of the pole when it pops from a down rigger. You are the trill of a king salmon on the line, a mourning. You are that moment when everything in my chest loosens up, because I forgot the liberation down to my nerve endings. You crack me open, a shock to the system, and I will fall to my knees for the smallness you make me feel. I yield. I yield.
You are hours and hours of darkness. You are sun reaching over the peaks across the bay, barely kissing their snow caps, dipping back below to remind us that to you, we are nothing. You are February. You are a pool of liquor we drown in. You are the impact of a body against another body, a fist to a face, a head, a tummy, a child. You are what we call cabin fever, the excuse given to apologize for our failure to survive you. You deprive us just enough until we are so grateful for your light and heat and whizzing of thrushes in the branches above the bluff.

You are this and all the violence we enact upon you, you enact on us, we enact on ourselves, each other. We yield together.

“A midway-between-color, gray is composed of multiplicities…a becoming-no/color. The temporal, physical and mental interval between two phenomena takes on here a compelling dimension.”

—Trinh Minh-ha

An attempt:

Before I could walk I was first toted on my mother—on her bike, on her back. As I grew I became the sled-leader of a homemade piping contraption which strapped into my father as he flew forward on his skis. “Mush!” I yelled, and off he’d start, his thighs
pushing each ski outward until we were soon flying. A full moon ski, colder than we’d thought, a small patch of frozen skin on my cheek. It still grows white when the rest of my face grows pink—a deadening.

Trying myself, crying on the hills. Trying first: the duckwalk. Trying second: a sideways step to carve steps. Trying, finally: I pulled my skis off violently, wanting to throw them over the cliffs and walk home, sobbing. The tears froze to my cheeks in a salty coating.

Now I go when the light is barely left and I fly. The curves make way for me until I am sweating, pulsing, the layers which coat my body feel encasing as they grow wet. My face pink. I stop—only once—at the edge of the cliff. Below me, the bay, and watching—the mountains. They have stopped making me feel small, but they still remind me of my absolute nothingness. A humbling. I push off with my thigh in a skating position and struggle up the hills. The homesteads flank this visit, barely peeking out from the blankets of white. This hill is the same hill, even twenty-four winters after that wedding, even though we keep trying to carve new trails in snow and in dirt—it is still the same, unyielding.

———

A caller at 4:52 p.m. reported an overdue dinner guest. The caller was concerned the guest had trouble on hazardous roads. The caller contacted police later to say the guest had been found.
A caller at 3:47 p.m. reported a child hit by a rock on Mattox Street.

A caller at 7:05 p.m. reported a man lying on the side of the road on the Sterling Highway. Police responded but could not find the man.

Dear Alaska,

In a place of open arms and hearts, the pumping on a sleeve, why wouldn’t the hurt be so immediate and so lasting? We grieve together, you and I. A collective hurting. When something or someone goes wrong, we feel it to the blood pumping between us, pumping the trigger which pumps through a body, a shell casing all that is left over. This pain is ancient and deep, we just happen to be new to you, my stranger. I still can’t get you out of my body. You are water and I come home whenever it rains.

Dear Alaska,

You trick me into believing I have a choice. I am looking for versions of you that are safer, that require less sacrifice, that make me feel less whole. I am looking for you everywhere and I know exactly where you are.
Dear Alaska,

I know that salmon use the earth’s magnetic field as their compass and you pull them north. They can smell home and it smells like you, and you pull their bodies home. You pull for me in my stomach, right behind my belly button—a gnawing, yearning. I mourn for you, the loss of you, the way I can never find you without the bruises returning. You pull them home and there they find their way to the place they grew, to spawn, to die, to become hollow bodies that replenish you upon their death. They do not have a choice. There is nothing emotional about this.

“Nature: the feminine, the sexual, but also the supernatural, the spiritual.”

—Trinh Minh-Ha

A photo:

Beach rocks in a small pile stack beneath the sand of our blanket. Looking at the camera is my mother in her fleece that I wear now. She smiles her kindness into us. I have a curly head full of hair and my eyes are squinting together, laughing, like I remember most days. Behind me is the Sequin’s sweet face—he is on his knees and looks straight at the
camera, his brown eyes a conundrum in our blue-eyed family, so serious, a furrow on his baby brow. Behind the three of us is my father—well, I think he is there. All you can see are his bare feet and the black of his hair, the back of a gray sweatshirt. He is sound asleep, shirts stuffed together for a pillow beneath his head. Behind our picnic the beach stretches on and on, curving into the harbor, and the water, and then past—the mountains jut up into an open space. They watched me as I grew and the light in the winter that barely glimpsed over them kept me feeling as small as I am pictured here.
WORKS CITED


The boys sit on the beach flanked by a black spruce forest too thick with trees to climb. By birth order: El, Drew, Lou, and Tom. Each of them sit by a fire, the embers already low, the daylight of the summer stretching on. They never know what time it is in the summer.

Tom is the only one down the beach, looking at starfish in the small tide pools by the cove. He is six. He won’t remember this, just barely, but the others will.

El puts a pot of creek water on the embers. Drew got the shits a few weeks back from sipping right out from it and has steadily been losing weight ever since. El doesn’t look at him and that way he won’t feel the guilt that he does for being the oldest and not protecting them. He’s in charge of the shot gun. He hasn’t shot anything yet.

“I’m hungry,” whines Tom, his shirt pulling up to reveal his big belly button. He pokes at it with his sticky fingers. His face is dirty.

“Shut up,” Lou snaps back. “We all hungry.”

“You can shut up, too,” El says. He hasn’t shot anything yet.

“Let me take the gun!” Drew stands up, his long thin legs stretching above them all. “I’ll go get a motherfucking moose, and we’ll eat like kings!” But then he starts coughing and slouches over himself, trying to breathe.

“This all we got left?” Lou says, pulling out the box of dried milk.
“Few cans of spam, is all,” El whispers, eyeing Tom, making sure he doesn’t hear. “Don’t let him worry, alright? Shut up.”

Drew finally stops coughing, lies on his back on the sand, trying to breathe.

“They gotta come back for us, right? Soon?” he says up to the sky. No stars in the summer. Endless daylight. It doesn’t bother them. They sleep like pigs, snoring, not even bothering to cover up with the blanket they have. All but El. He doesn’t sleep. He listens for sounds of the forest, his hand on his rifle.

Lou stays up only when it rains. The pounding on the tarp always keeps him alert, incensed. He can’t help but be angry about the constant noise, about Tom sucking his thumb, about his mumbles in the night. But when he starts shivering Lou pulls the blanket up around Tom’s face, mostly to shut him up, keep him from waking up and whining.

“How long was it last time?” Lou asks. El smiles at that.

Then Drew laughs, a wheezing, cold laugh. “Doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Kairos time,” El says, nodding. “All I know is that Tom’s about to lose that baby fat Regis spends all winter putting on him.”

Lou starts up at that, and they start hooting, laughing, chucking their heads back and trying to laugh at the woods. An echo answers them. They don’t stop. The echo bounces back and forth. They shout into it, laughing, hearing their own voices bounding back, then laughing at the deepness that returns.

“I sound like a man!” Drew yells, his voice booming back to him. He smiles.
Tom walks up, pouting, his little lip quivering.

“You guys sound like hyenas,” he says quietly, like he’s ever seen one. They laugh harder at that, pull him in, and then his little baby-laughs start up from his belly. He doesn’t know what he’s laughing at but his hiccups keep them laughing, and that’s his job, that’s his job. It’s his job to make them laugh and so he keeps hiccuping until he can’t anymore, until his little body is spent and sleepy, and he falls asleep beside the fire. Lou carries him to bed. Drew and El sit up, talking. He can hear them murmur but can’t hear what they’re saying.
THE JESSALEE HOME

The Huntress, her black paint and deep berth of a bow, gleamed and smirked at Lou as he walked up to her on the docks. The storms they’d weathered together would never outshine his ties to another human, let alone a woman. That first winter together he’d troop down to see her in the worst of weather, shoveling snow off the deck and de-icing her windows with a hair dryer. Love was temporary, but his ship—they would die together, he knew, or she would outlive him. Simple as that.

“You mother-fucking cunt,” Lou growled towards Eric as he climbed aboard.

“That’s not how you tie a fucking bowline.”

The day was cold. Eric stood in front of him—Eric, sixteen, blonde and far from naive. He was finally old enough to work—but no free pass, no free passes for anyone. Lou knew what it took to toughen up a man.

“Sorry, sir. Working on that.”

Lou tied the knot angrily for him, threw it on deck, then slinked into the cabin. Shit was everywhere. Screws and tools and lube and grease littered his bunk. So much had to get done in the next few weeks. They wanted to be out of here that first week in June, for sure. Had to get to the fishing grounds in case the run came early. He reached for the bottle of rum underneath his seat. Where was Tom? Lazy little brother, that son of a bitch. They were always pulling for him early in the season while he slept in, never quite finishing the projects that needed to get done on his own boat. Plus, Lou was
getting too comfortable drinking alone. It made him nervous. Maybe it was too early? Nah. He doused the bottom of his mug.

He sat in the captain’s chair and adrenaline coursed through him like it always did. The itchy feeling he felt on land dissipated, even in the harbor, when he sat in this chair. He’d never been allowed on the captain’s seat as a kid, delegated to the sticky fish-scale floor. Even when his older brother El bought his own boat at seventeen, the rules stayed the same. So his rules stayed the same. This was his fucking throne, he thought, satisfied.

“Sir,” came Eric’s high voice. He coughed. “Sir,” deeper. “There’s someone out here to see you.”

“Who?” He kept gazing out over the bow, surveying the boats around him, lost in his thoughts. The boats of his brothers flanked either side of the Huntress, but no one else was down here today. Typical. El was probably still at home with his wife. Tom was probably somewhere eating. They’d mosey on down in the next few days and wonder how Lou had managed to get so much done already. Then they’d ask him for help, the pussies, and he’d help them, send Ed and Eric over to lift the shit their deckhands couldn’t, steal his tools when he left early for dinner with his family.

“Someone from the Jessalee Home?”

“What in Christ?”

“Excuse me, I’ll just come aboard,” he heard from the deck. A woman’s voice.
“I don’t know if that’s a good…” Eric’s voice trailed off, wimpy. Lou poured coffee over the rum in his mug. Strong and black.

“Hello there.”

He spun his chair around, startled by her boldness. She was in the cabin, this woman he didn’t know.

“Uhh,” he started.

“My name is Kim Fields, I’m looking for a Lou Moreno? I called your house, talked to your wife. Sorry to disturb you at work.”

“I’m Lou Moreno.”

“Fantastic, how nice. I hoped I’d found the right boat. She’s a beaut!”

“Thank you.” His sipped his coffee, looked her up and down. Nice legs, probably, under those frumpy-looking pants. She had long dark hair, not too young, nice looking, yeah. Something told him she wasn’t quite white, not quite, and he couldn’t put his finger on what she might be, really, and he felt his spine tighten, straighten. He shifted in his chair. Was it her eyes? Dark brown, slightly squinted. He didn’t ask her to sit. “You’re looking for me?”

“Yes, right, sorry.” She flustered around. “Can I put this down?” She didn’t wait for his answer and plopped her purse on the day bunk. “I had it in here, hold on.” She dug around, papers spilling out, a lipgloss, some round thing Lou didn’t recognize.
He felt awkward. Something about a beautiful woman he didn’t know put him on edge, and here she was in his cabin. He tried to pull his fists apart, letting his fingers rest of the knees of his jeans, tense waiting.

“Oh! Here we go.” She pulled out a bundle of grayish papers. “Lou Moreno.”

“Yes.” He paused. She was looking intently at the papers, staring. “That’s me.” He tried to smile, half his face staying in a frown, he knew. He’d never been good at smiling when he thought too much about it.

“Lou Moreno. Okay, here we go. So, see, let me explain. I’ve got this paperwork that says you spent time at the Jessalee Home, in Seward? Back in the 50s. Well, I don’t have to tell you that!” She gave out a high-pitched laugh. Then she put the papers down.

“My parents were there, too, I think, and so I’ve been trying to do a little research on where they come from, who they were as children. I’m no journalist,” she smiled at him, “but I’ve been looking into the records there. Sounds like some really terrible things were happening in Alaska at the time, you know, TB strains across the state, especially in native populations. I mean, they almost wiped out whole villages. The home was probably for Native orphans of TB victims—well—we can call them victims, right? TB wasn’t even a thing before European contact. Russian contact. I don’t know. History is so sticky around here, isn’t it?”

“Wait,” he stopped her, put his cup down. He clenched his fists back together.

“What are you saying, exactly?”
“I wanted to ask you some questions about your time at the Jessalee Home. It’s not going anywhere beyond me, let me tell you, I just wanted to know more about my parents.”

“Wait, wait. I—I don’t care about, uh, just shut up.” He stood up, stood over her. She flinched backwards. He stood, quickly, striding across the cabin. He looked out at Eric who carefully swept up wood and metal shavings from their welding project earlier.

“Eric! Ed!” He yelled. “Get the fuck out of here!”

Ed, his older deckhand, grabbed his jacket without hesitating and swung himself down to the docks. He sauntered off, looking back only once.

“What?” Eric cowered.

“Go grab lunch, for fuck’s sake. Get out of here.”

Eric looked at him. “Sir…”

“This is none of your damn business, Eric, so get yourself on out of here—I’m not going to say it again.”

“Yessir.” He grabbed his jacket and hitched himself over the side of the boat. His boots dragged on the docks as he ran off.

He went back into the cabin.

“I’m so sorry, sir, I didn’t mean to upset you.” She was cleaning up the mess she’d made on the floor. The papers sat on the dash. “I hope—I hope, I mean, I’ll just go, my mistake.”
He grabbed the papers. He stared at them. He kept staring. The words jumbled up in front of him. He felt the rage bloom up again.

“What do these say, exactly?” He tried to word it in a way that didn’t give himself away, the way he’d done in school, when they’d even gone to school. The moods of his parents, in and out of that building he’d hated. Tom was the only one who’d finished, stable enough at that time because El was taking care of them by then.

“I’m sorry, here, let me explain.” She sat back down, looking at him. He shifted, uncomfortable. The silence stretched on.

“Go, then.” His patience was gone, his cool gone, everything in his stomach boiling up between his ribs. His left foot shook itself, tapping madly in a way he couldn’t slow down.

“I found this paperwork when I was doing research down in Seward. I thought—hey. Maybe this guy knew my parents and could tell me what it was like growing up in what was, essentially, an orphanage. An asylum. I don’t know what to call it.”

“This says I was there, at this—Jessalee home?”

“Oh, sorry? You—you… didn’t—. Yes. Yeah, here, it says you and your brother were there for several years.”

“Of course, of course. That’s right.” He was silent for a full minute. Not looking at her. “Ahh. What brother? Younger?” and she nodded. He and Tom—well they’d always been darker. El with his blue eyes, his confidence. Drew’s streaks of blonde, always a joke—mailman’s kid. They didn’t have a mailman, after all, on the homestead.
But his parents didn’t love him any less than they loved Drew and El, nope, not a chance. Only Tom, the baby, sniveling and lazy and their mother’s favorite, didn’t get beat like they had. If anyone had been adopted, it was Drew—he was the only one who left, who’d made a life for himself down in the lower 48. A judge, the last Lou heard, somewhere down in Montana. It’d been years

“Oh—okay, um. Well. It says here you were there from 1955-58, before you were…adopted.”

“Does it say who adopted me?”

“Umm…” She looked at him again, then slipped her eyes down towards the papers. “It doesn’t, I’m sorry. These weren’t…well, they weren’t the best records, the most trustworthy. I had to pull a lot of strings to even find them. Seems the state doesn’t really want us to know this sort of stuff even happened.”

“The state?”

“It was a government program. Kids who came from villages that were destroyed by the epidemic?”

“Villages? So…natives.”

“Yes.”

“Natives.” He spun his chair away from her, still trying to squint at the papers. It didn’t make sense that his name would be on papers before his family adopted him, right? Especially his last name. He would’ve gotten that when they picked him up. If anything, the papers would’ve said his given name: Polar Bear or Eagle Boy or some shitty native
name. It didn’t make sense, any of it. But then—Jace as a baby flashed through his memory, his son’s darkened, hard eyes. The way he’d blink up. Jace now with his eyebrows—looking almost like a damn Mexican, for Christ’s sake. “He’s awfully dark,” his mother had said after a particularly long vacation in Hawaii one winter. “Isn’t he?”

Except Lou looked like his brothers—all of them, even Drew. They all had the epic Moreno belly before they went out fishing—their winter whale skin. “If you have a good tool, you build a shed over it,” said El. Except Pop didn’t have that belly. And Lou had always felt different, hadn’t he? Like he hadn’t quite fit into his own family? But then, that didn’t mean anything. No one ever felt like they fit into their own family, not really.

“Mr. Moreno?”

“Hm.” He turned back to her. He felt light-headed, flushed.

“Do you remember my parents?” She fiddled with the zipper on her purse, clutched in close to her chest.

“No. No, I don’t.”

As soon as the woman left, Lou called the house phone.

“Hello,” Deena answered, breathless.

“Hey honey, it’s me.”

“Hi.” She drawled out the word. They were being sweet to each other.

“What’s happening there?”
“Oh, not much.” He could hear Jace playing basketball in the living room, the ball hitting against the wall. “Molly cut herself on the bathroom cabinet this morning. She’s picking out a bandaid.”

“Polly Pocket? Or Monsters?”

“Polly Pocket, of course.” He could hear the smile in Deena’s voice. They were okay. Everything was okay.

“Everything okay, then?”

“Yeah, babe, why? Did that lady stop by? What’d she want?”

“Oh, it was nothing. A mix-up. She had the wrong man. Signals got crossed, something. Not me.”

They both waited. From his spot in the cabin he could see Eric trying to sneak back on the deck, a footlong Subway sandwich in his hands.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Another pause. “Do you need me to pick anything up for dinner?”

“You forgot.”

“What?”

“Your parents are coming over tonight?”

“Well, shit. Oh, Dee, I can’t deal with their bullshit tonight. Can you get out of it?”

“Oh, hell no. Don’t you put me in the middle of whatever is going on this time.”

“Can’t you call and tell them one of the kids is sick?”
“No. And you’re going to explain to me what’s going on when you get home, okay? Please? Shit—Molly just ran outside. I’ll—I’ll do my best.” She hung up.

Lou stomped out onto the deck, the rage welling up inside him again at the sight of Eric trying to slip down into the engine room before he saw him.

“Eric Radford.”

“Hey, boss.” He came back up, eyeing Lou up and down. He stood there clutching his sandwich.

“Eric Radford, stop looking at me like that.”

“Sorry, boss.”

“I can’t tell if you want to fuck me or eat me.”

Eric paused.

“Can I make you a ham sandwich, boss?”

“Would you get that damn wrench out from the engine room and start tightening the hydraulic nuts? They need greasing too. Gun’s downstairs. Get to work, you cock-sucker.” Lou slammed back into the cabin, the door unbending behind him, and propped his feet up on the dash. His frown deepened and he rubbed his chin with the sharp end of a screwdriver. The harbor blended out of his concentration.

He closed the door behind him and dropped the bag of papers down with his boots. In the mudroom he stuck the bag in one of the winter clothes’ bins that still sat,
He didn’t want to go there, not tonight. The house smelled of deep moose roast and stewed tomatoes.

He used to come home from tanner crabbing just like this. He could still hear the slight shriek of their little voices: “Dad’s home!” and their pounding feet, and he’d put down the crab at the end of the hallway and hide. The scampering would immediately jolt to silence and Molly would screech, and then Jace would start laughing as the crab crawled after them. One step at a time, each slow creaky leg moving down the carpet runner. Then out he’d pop, all of them laughing.

He stood in the hallway now, the house he built, looking at all their things. The jackets hanging from the posts too loosely looked tattered and frayed. The little pink boots that Molly grew out of were still glinting brand new. Their artwork on the walls, chipped macaroni pulled off where someone had tried to eat it. Dog hair and human hair in the carpet, he could tell, he could smell it, he knew it was under the places Deena vacuumed religiously. He’d always believed a woman’s vacuum was her way of controlling a room, running it along in broad strokes with a path of destruction behind. He knew who he’d married, after all.

“You’d better hop in the shower before they get here,” Deena called from the kitchen. Jace came bounding down the stairs, all limbs. Lou really looked at him, then, tousled his hair.

“Geez, buddy, isn’t it time for a haircut soon?”
“Yeah right! I’m trying to grow it out long—like all the way to here, maybe!”

Jace held his fingers over his shoulders. “Then I’ll look like a real warrior.”

Lou tilted his head to the side, imagining this. His son was perfect. He wasn’t native, no way.

The doorbell rang.

“Motherfucker,” Deena yelled as she poured the noodles out over the sink.

“Oh! It’s hot! And of course they’re early. Of course.”

“I’ll get this,” Lou said, taking the pan from her.

“Yeah right. You go answer the door, you whining bastard. They’re your parents. Molly! Jace! Get your asses down here and say hello to your grandparents!”

“Gramma! Granpa!” Molly called as she stumbled down the stairs. She was quick, although not entirely surefooted. She’d fall flat on her face and barely slow down—get back up and keep up the exact same pace. Jace sauntered in from the living room.

“I can’t find my ball.”

“I hid it,” called Deena. “You’ve got to be social tonight, sorry, Bubs. You can have it back after dinner. Please just talk to them?”

“Can’t I have my ball to do that?”

The doorbell rang again. This time a loud rapping followed. Regis.

“I don’t know why she doesn’t just let her own damn self in,” Lou said under his breath as he padded down the hall. “I’m coming!”
“You know what I did, son?” Regis was already saying on her way in the door. She carried three bags, all stuffed to the brim with crinkling plastic. “I brought my new book for Deena if she wants it. Deena?” she called louder, “I brought another book for you, honey.” Lou could almost hear Deena’s muttering under her breath, even though she was down the hall in the other room, probably stirring the sauce. Deena hated to be called ‘honey’ and only allowed Lou to call her ‘dear’ if, she said, he spelled it in his head d-e-e-r.

“Oh, and hello to the kiddos!” Regis had found Molly and was honing in on her little face.

“My, Molly, by golly Miss Molly!” barked Frank. “Where’s Jace?”

“He’s out in the living room. Pop, want me to get your coat?”

“Oh, I got it, I got it.” Frank struggled to pull his arms out, then dropped his coat on the floor of the mud room. “A hackin’ sackin’ jetsam flat-son, Jace is. He’ll be around here, Regis, yes he will. With that ball of his! Wacking and stacking it all across the living room—I’ll be damned they let a boy ruin this nice furniture like that, but what do I know, I ain’t never had nice things…” and off went Frank down the hall.

Lou picked up the jacket and hung it up on a peg.

“What do you want me to do with these bags, Regis? Moving in?”

“Oh!” she laughed. “Oh! Funny. Just hilarious, son. No, those are snacks for the kids. For later. Or for now. See, look, we’ve got all this caramel popcorn…” She started pulling out bag after bag.
“I’ll just put them out by Dad’s chair, right? He’ll want them later?”

“Oh, I suppose he will.”

Molly took the stack of snacks in her little arms and importantly walked down the hallway with them, her ponytail swishing bossy behind her.

“She’s really something, isn’t she?”

Lou nodded, pained, trying to get down the hallway after the rest of the family before he said something he’d regret. Regis pulled out her jar of sugar and swept herself down the hall.

“Can’t quite figure out where she came from, to be honest. Never met a little girl so self-important, have you?”

“No, Regis.” He felt affectionate towards her for a second, then remembered all the times he’d caught her telling Molly not to frown, that the lines on her face would freeze there and make her into an old woman. Molly’s face froze up in horror, and then she’d try to smooth out the lines, so she had a sort of creepy smile on her face, until Lou had to explain. Had to tell his mother to knock it the fuck off.

“Almost ready,” Deena called to them. He moved towards Deena and squeezed her hip, lowering his voice.

“Ready for what?” he growled, even though neither of his parents could hear a goddamn thing anymore. She moved away from him, grinning. She shook her head but smiled down at the sauce she stirred.
“Let me ask your mother,” Regis was saying. “Deena? Deena. Molly would like to know if she can have a piece of this chocolate bar. Can she share with her grandpa?”

“No, Molly, it’s almost dinner time.”

“But I want some! Grandpa gets to eat before dinner! And I’m starving.” She flung her head back so that her hair reached all the way down her back, then moved her chin around so her hair swayed.

“Tough toodles, drama llama,” Lou said, scooping her up and kissing her neck.

“Tough shit, Molls,” Deena said at the same time, putting a lid on a casserole dish full of spaghetti and sauce. “Can you set the table please?”

“Ugh,” she breathed out. “Why doesn’t Jace ever have to do anything and I have to do everything? I hate setting the table.”

Jace was sitting next to his grandpa, not listening to the warnings Frank was spinning at him. Something about girls Jace wasn’t interested in yet, and places he couldn’t go. His fingers twitched, missing the small basketball he carried, and Lou felt a pang for him. Like he’d thrown him into the all-too-familiar boiling water to fend for himself, all by himself.

Regis was already seated, critiquing Molly on her table-setting skills. Molly was looking at her, the stack of plates looking heavier and heavier in her arms, her jaw dropping ever so slightly.
“And that’s why you shouldn’t eat so much sugar,” Regis was lecturing to her. The half-eaten chocolate bar was placed beside Regis’s left hand. “I just don’t want you to get fat.”

Molly stared.

“Regis,” Deena warned from the kitchen.

“Are you serious, Ma? Leave her alone.”

“I just don’t want that for her, is all. I just like her thin. She’ll have an easier go at it, anyway, not like I did.”

Pop made a noise like a laugh or a cough, then whispered something to Jace.

“What kind of an excuse do you have, anyway, woman?” he cackled. “Just stayed home with you yeller monsters, you know, not like she had to do any real work,” he said to Jace. Jace’s face didn’t move but his eyebrows seemed to deepen.

“You’re beautiful, Molls. No matter what you look like. Big, little, fat, skinny, doesn’t matter. Beautiful!” Lou took the stack of plates from her and picked her up. She stared at him, then put her head on his chest.

“I don’t know whether to cry or laugh,” she whispered into his ear. He could feel her working open his chest.

“Ahh,” he said awkwardly, holding her away from him. “You don’t have to do either!” He put her down.
They set the table together. Regis watched. Her jar of sugar was propped next to her plate, ready for action. When Deena brought over the food, Pop was dished first, then Regis, then Lou and the kids. The sugar jar creaked as she unscrewed it.

“It’s not that it’s not good, Deena,” Regis began. “I just like my sauce a little sweeter, is all.”

Lou had to put down his fork for a second, clench his fist under the table, then try again. He took a sip of water and felt his hand begin to shake, the level of water wobbling in a ring.

“That’s fine, Regis. Just fine.” Deena smiled.

He looked over at his father. Frank was chewing his heart out with his six teeth, making a vehement jaw motion that puffed his cheeks out every so often. Pieces of noodle flew out every time he breathed. Deena had stopped watching the floor underneath him years ago, but Lou could feel crumbs falling all over his feet. He could hear them pinging off the wood floor and bouncing around into corners that would never be found, seen, until they stood growing mold and infecting the air they breathed. It was like his father was planting seeds of crumbs to find later, taking root and screwing down into the floors he had so carefully polished.

He took another sip of water and almost dropped the glass. Deena looked at him, her eyes searching. He was watching her for the first time. He was watching them for the first time. Molly looked up at him and smiled, and he felt his heart skip a beat. She looked back down.
“You really want to know the secret of long-lasting youth,” Regis was saying.

“It’s getting your daily fruits. I read that a long time ago. The secret to happy heart health. Daily fruits. That’s why I always bring my cherries.”

She rummaged around in one of her bags. Out plopped a jar of maraschino cherries.

“So, you see, so long as you’re getting daily fruits intake, you’re set. My diabetes got much better after I started eating more fruit.”

She sprinkled more sugar over her spaghetti sauce. Lou watched his plate. He suddenly realized he hadn’t tasted anything, that the food felt stiff and unyielding in his mouth, growing thicker with each bite.

Someone dropped a utensil and Molly laughed. Deena made eye contact with him and then looked backed down. Molly looked up and out the window and laughed again. She suddenly seemed old to him. The hair raised on his arms.

“My other Mama and me picked cherries before the snow fell,” she said into the air around her, to nobody in particular. Jace was the only one unphased. He kept shoveling in spaghetti, only his eyes roving around at all of them. Regis put her napkin to her mouth. “They didn’t look like that, though, Granma. My other Mama loved me so much she hid me, right under the boards, and we listened for people to find us. And that’s when I came here! I like it here better.” She clapped her hands, picked up her fork again and started scooping up the noodles Deena had cut for her.
“She’s really gotten out of control with that gibberish, hasn’t she?” Regis asked quietly. “I thought she’d grown out of it. Didn’t you say she’d grown out of it?”

“She’s never quite said anything like that,” Deena said. She looked like she might cry. Lou grabbed her hand under the table, shook his head at her.

“I know a woman out East End who has her own yurt cottage—that’s where you should take her. She does all sorts of healing magic, knows about these things—I bet she’s seen this before. It might be more common than we think.”

Molly laughed to herself, a low heh-heh, then picked up a noodle. She stared at it, then laughed again. She put it in her mouth, chomping extra big, her ponytail bouncing. Mmmmm—came a deep sound out of her throat. Lou frowned and looked at her again.

“She’ll get whatever is in her—out,” Regis said, too knowingly. “And maybe she’ll have some suggestions about how to take care of how much that girl eats. Maybe they’re linked problems.”

Lou nearly choked on his food. His family seemed to move in watery, washed-down versions of themselves, like the ringing in his ears sunk him to the bottom of the ocean. He watched his hand shake until he dropped his fork, then slammed his fist on the table.

“That’s it.” Everybody looked up at him. Molly dropped her fork and her jaw at the same time, her eyes getting big. “Nothing is wrong with my children. Nothing. You have no fucking right…” he trailed off. “You! Of all the fucking people. And stop—just stop—trying to do that to them, got it?”
Deena stood up, pink in the face, and grabbed Molly’s hand.

“Hey, kiddos, let’s head downstairs. Molls you want to pick a movie?”

“Yeah,” she said softly. She was watching her dad, her eyes wide.

“I want to stay,” Jace said, looking back and forth between Frank and Lou. Deena glared at him and nodded towards the stairs. He pushed himself away from the table, eyes rolling.

“I’ll be right back!” Deena said, her voice chipper and strained, like she was talking to children.

“I had no idea that would offend you so much, my goodness. I thought I raised a different son, I guess. Everyone is just making such a big deal out of everything tonight. Everyone is just to sensitive,” Regis said softly. She sipped on her water. “What’s going on with you, Lou-bird? Is everything alright? Is it Deena?”

“No, Regis, it is not Deena. It’s absolutely not Deena. Are you fucking serious?” He was losing it again—the focus. He pushed his chair back, his feet making distinct pounds into the wood floor, and he imagined the violence they’d inflict on this house in its lifetime. The holes that they’d make. The places their footsteps landed would become squeaky, soft spots would form, nails popping out of the woodwork and varnish growing thin in the important spots. He slapped down his bag and pulled out the papers.

“I had a visitor, today, on the boat.”

“Oh, well, that’s nice, sweetie—a new deckhand?”
“This woman. Ma, she brought these papers by—papers that have my name on it. The Jessalee Home? You guys should just tell me. Just tell me right now and then you can get the fuck out my house and stop trying to raise my kids, because frankly, what a dandy you did on the first round.”

“That’s out of line, out of line,” Frank was flustered, threw down his own fork. “Out of line, son. No, no, don’t you dare speak to us like that. After we’d raised you! Given you everything you’ve got. Wouldn’t have that boat if it weren’t for us, now, would ya? That’s right, that’s just not right.”

Once he’d said his peace, he quieted right back down.

“Now what are you talking about, now?” Regis looked taken aback entirely, her hands shaking. “You can both calm down right this second. I don’t know what you’re talking about, Lou, but it’s upset your father and, well…”

She looked scared. Oh! How he hated that scared look in her eyes, all too familiar. It felt like hundreds of years had already passed between the three of them, in that moment sitting side-by-side at the dinner table, that the fear of her husband had moved them back and forth through centuries of memories, all the cascading drops of branded skin and splinters, locked doors as snow swirled around his wispy dark boy-hair. Let me in, he heard his own voice, Tom’s smaller voice beside him. Can’t we come in?

“The Jessalee Home, Ma! I know all about it. My name’s all over these papers—and it says I had a brother there. That Tom? A home for native kids. Regis, now you better goddamn listen. You need to answer me, straight, and none of that personal version
of history that no one else can fucking remember. Got it? None of the bullshit. We’ve always been darker, you always said that, always!”

“The Jessalee Home?” Frank squinted his eyes through his glasses, looked up at the ceiling.

“A home for kids! Kids after the TB scare up north! Village kids, native kids. My name’s on this.” He pulled the papers closer to Frank, who couldn’t read either. “Pop. It says I was adopted. It says right here…” He struggled to find it. “Well, anyway, what? You needed a couple extra kids to do all the work? More you could abandon here and there when you felt like it?” He threw the papers down and walked back into the kitchen. He rummaged under the sink and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. His hands were steadier on the counter as he turned to look at them. Regis was combing through the papers, her beady blue eyes scanning quickly.

“Well this is just hil-ar-i-ous,” she started. “This is just a joke! What a joke! Absolutely not, absolutely not. I pushed you out all by myself. Absolutely hilarious.”

“I don’t look like either of you.”

“You’re not a damn native, son. How could you even say that. My son, a native. Ha! You’re uglier than a goddamn sonofabitch but that doesn’t make you a native.”

Frank laughed at his own joke.

“Lou-bird, don’t forget that you look like your brothers. All of you. You all look so similar I sometimes called you the same names over and over on accident.”

“Sometimes Deena calls the dog ‘Jace.’ Don’t mean shit. Means nothing.”
“Well what exactly would you like us to do, son?” Pop spoke up. “I wasn’t around, but I knows you’re my son, for Christ’s sake. Adopted. Where the fuck did you come up with that?”

“I just told you—a woman—“ he faltered. He sipped back the whiskey. “It makes a lot of sense, actually, to be real fucking frank with you.”

“It makes no sense at all! You’ve always been my favorite, always!” She looked so distressed in that moment he almost felt pity for her, then swallowed it back down. He’d made that mistake before.

“You want me to call up your aunts? That’s what we’ll do—we’ll call up Bernice. She’ll tell you! She was there in the room when you came screaming out of me. What a mess that was, oh, she’ll remember. She’ll remember because it was a holiday, wasn’t it Frank, a holiday?” They looked at each other, shrugging their shoulders and squinting.

“Fourth of July,” Lou said under his breath. They didn’t hear him. “I was born on the Fourth of July.”

Deena came padding down the stairs. The look on her face told Lou she’d heard everything. She stood in front of the table, steadied herself on the back of a chair.

“I—I think you guys should probably go. I’ll, uh, I’ll pack you up some tupperware and you can eat it at home?” Her voice was soft, wielding, a relief.

Regis sniffed, looked at her son to disagree. But Lou looked down at the counter, traced the edge of his glass with his finger. His throat was warm, his face hot from shouting. He tossed back the rest of it.
“I’m not leaving until Lou-bird truly understands,” she said softly.

“Not adopted, son, why’d you even think up a thing like that!”

Deena didn’t say anything, just looked at him from across the room. They all looked at him. He looked up out across the counter and caught his reflection in the dark window. His face was skewed by the bow of it. He looked old, ragged, the lines of his face deepening with the poor lighting of the kitchen.

“I was born on the Fourth of July,” he said softly to himself. Only Deena heard.

“You must truly understand, darling,” Regis started. “I remember cradling you in my arms in that blue blanket. Your blue eyes. The only one of my children with blue eyes. A mother doesn't just love someone else’s kid, not the way I loved you.”

He looked at her.

“Well, if that’s what you want, Deena,” she said, picking up her bag and slinging it over her shoulder. “Yes. We’ll go, we’ll go. Frank! Get your coat.” She fumbled out of the table and trooped down the hall. Lou didn’t move to help, didn’t follow them to say goodbye. He heard Regis talking louder to Deena so that he’d hear, heard his father grumble about being hungry. Then—quiet. Deena stood in the kitchen, watching him. She leaned up against the wall, silent.

“I think I was adopted, Dee,” he whispered. “What the fuck.”

“Lou!” She grabbed his face and looked at him closely. His eyes fell to the floor.

“‘You really want to know? You want to know if you were adopted by them? We’ll make a few quick phone calls, it’ll be easy, get the birth records. It’s not a big deal anymore!”
They have internet services, even. I bet it’s so easy. You want to know? I’ll call up Michigan right now.” She let him go and grabbed the phone.

“It’s midnight, there, Dee. Nobody’s going to answer.” He was suddenly so tired.

“All I’m saying is it’d be easy to tell. Don’t you want to know?”

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. She reached over and took the bottle from the counter. He released his grip on it.

“I’d want to know. I do want to know. Does it matter, I guess?”

“I don’t know.”

“They raised you, anyway, they’re family. The boys are your family. What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing,” he said. He squeezed her hand and kept staring at himself in the reflection of the window.

That night, Lou pretended to sleep next to his wife, but he was really listening. His body had to stay completely still, otherwise she would know, otherwise she would move, too, and cradle her head into the crook between his neck and his shoulder. She’d look at him and ask him what he was thinking about, and his voice might crack. He might unleash everything, everything, until all the wind of the past came howling back in through their big storm windows. It’d pull the covers back on the bed and leave them both shivering. So he stayed still, only his eyes moving back and forth on the ceiling, listening.
He pulled himself out of the bed and Deena sat up. She watched him leave the room, but didn’t follow. He walked down the hall, the wooden floors smooth with the occasional knot in the grain. He had built these walls to hold truth. He had carefully crafted each wall of sheetrock, sawed every beam, tiled every last nook and cranny—so that the four of them could withstand all the memories that he could not. He found himself crouched by the tent they let the kids sleep in that night—pitched right in the middle of the living room beside the fireplace. He unzipped the edge.

“Hi, Daddy,” Molly whispered. Her eyes were big in the dark. Jace was asleep next to her, his ball cradled in his arms.

“Hi, monster.”

She climbed out of the tent and propped herself up on her knees. She grabbed his thumb.

“Where you going, Daddy? Back to the boat?”

He smiled.

“Yes.”

“Can I come with you?” He looked at her. She stuck out her bottom lip and made her eyes bigger. He chuckled and shook his head. No saying no to that.

“Get your jacket and boots, then.”

He unlocked the door of the boat and breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was in its place, in its rightful chaotic place, nothing out of the ordinary. Almost couldn’t tell
what had happened there this morning. He blinked. Kim Fields was gone, it never had happened, right?

“Daddy, pick me up? Can I sit in your chair?”

He looked down at her—her brown hair and clear white skin, her wide brown eyes. She did look like her mother, though, no doubt about that. She had his eyebrows. Serious. Furrowing. A little angry, a little bossy. He picked her up and placed her in the captain’s chair.

“Whoa,” she giggled. “I never been up here. Look at everything you can see!”

He moved his tools off the bed and propped himself up on his bunk. He watched her talk to herself, there, her ponytail bouncing and shaking with every emphasized syllable. She counted off her fingers and then laughed to herself, a maniacal little sound, pulling on the steering wheel. The lights from the harbormaster’s office lit up the boats around them. Yellow balls of light in the black water.

He willed himself to remember.

He tried closing his eyes.

But all he could remember, then, were the times on the beach. “See ya later, alligator,” Pop would chuckle. That first memory, what was it? Where was it? Digging urchin meat out of hole in the back of covered spines. Burning the last of the plastic wrappers, knowing they didn’t have any fuel left, his fingers so cold.

Further, he pushed, he whispered to himself. Molly was chattering in the background. He heard the word *Mama* in there and tried to remember who she was. Was
it Regis? Her blue eyes, blonde hair, thin face, flimsy blue hands? A blurring when he
tried to picture her face as a child. He never saw her, anyway. He never saw her.

He was in the woods, then, the first time Pop finally took him hunting. Pop had
left him out in the field and told him not to move, just to listen. Told him that if he
listened hard and a deer came, not to move, not to look for it. He had sat there, five,
maybe six years old, feeling frozen—listening. When his nose itched and his hip spasmed
from stillness, he didn’t scratch, and he didn’t shift. He waited. His stomach growled, he
 pissed himself, a shame rising up pink in his face, thinking of his brothers. Their laughter.
Dusk came, then darkness, and even though he had listened, he didn’t hear anything.

“Daddy?” Molly had slid off the chair and was looking at his face very closely.
What was in those eyes, he wondered, as she climbed into his lap. What does she know
about me, anyway. The next time he looked down Molly was fast asleep, a phillips screw
driver cradled in her little fist.

His children would not be left out in the cold, not in the dark, and all of that
buried deep into his chest—tying knots. It was not falling down around him, no, it was
not.
SETTLE DOWN

My old high school looks like a ski resort and has the skeleton of a whale hanging in the commons, and instead of those cheesy country songs about summer love, we used to get fucked up in love right straight in the dead of winter—town laps circling around all glare ice and dark, dark, dark.

So when my mom left once and for all, I was already trying to find some semblance of what love might look like, at least the kind of love that doesn’t fuck you up. But this isn’t a story about how I got my man, let me tell you right now. In the beginning Jace and I would make eye contact across algebra class and I’d grab the hall pass and he’d trail after me and we’d go fuck in the bathroom. Not much was said. People want me to believe that girls get more attached during a good fucking but it just wasn’t true for us. I’d watch Jace’s puppy-dog-face pass me during lunch or after school and I knew I had him in a way he did not have me.

When she left I thought like I did every time: good riddance. First Dad did what he normally did—he made me tea and forgot to bring it to me until it was cold. When he remembered he’d order pizza for dinner. When he forgot he made peanut butter
sandwiches. I knew he missed her because of the way his hands would shake as he
brought me all these things. We didn’t talk about it. She’d be back like always.

But then she didn’t come back right away. And then he sunk back into drinking
and splitting wood for hours and then his girlfriend came around and I would slam my
dresser against my door and smoke pot out the window—I figured that was better for my
lungs and I needed those lungs.

“You’re getting slower,” my coach told me a week after she left. It was
September and the peak of the season was coming. I would pull myself out of the pool
after another goddamn slowest time, towel off, and go sit in the shower under the water.
I’d turn it on so hot that my thighs got pink and the girls from the dive team would come
in and whisper around me and giggle as they got dressed and I’d feel boiling over all over
again.

I knew early on that my hometown wasn’t like others, no way. For one—there’s
no goddamn sun in the winter. Sun would circle right up above the mountains and if it
did, we were sitting in class asleep. Used to press my forehead to the glass in third period
trying to feel the rays through the clouds but all I could feel then was the cold air pushing
up against it.
For another, people disappear all the time. And when they go everybody knows about it. Actually, people know just about goddamn everything about you—or they think they do. When my mom left for good—and I knew it had to be for good this time, especially as the days kept on passing—it was like somebody put me up on a stage and asked me to tell them how I felt about souls. I’d as soon as taken my clothes off—but that’s easier to do sometimes.

When I’d go into that building first the secretary would say something to me about it.

“How you doing, Hattie?” she’d ask like she knew something deeper about me. I’d glare at her, sign my name on the late pass, and then look up.

“Peachy,” I’d say in a flat voice. She’d tilt her head all sympathetic and I’d try to turn away before I saw it.

When I’d walk down the hall it’d be the girls, mostly, looking out from behind their hands or their books or whispering to each other so discreetly. I’d put my head square on my shoulders and let my eyes blur all that peripheral bullshit out. Inevitably some idiot boy would come up to me, and maybe he’d heard about all my forays with Jace, and he’d say something like “Hey Hattie, that’s a great skirt,” and I’d smile my
fake-ass smile and have to say thank you, even if I didn’t feel thankful. “Thank you,” I’d say, and then turn around and see those same girls turning back to their lockers like it wasn’t any of their business who I decided to fuck with next. I overheard so many of those conversations: “Poor Jace, you know she’s just leading him on…” or “Jace deserves so much better.” They weren’t exactly trying to keep their feelings to themselves and so I tried to do the opposite.

I got real obsessive about her—about my mom. Mostly, I’d comb through all her old yearbooks and notebooks and pictures, looking for some clue about where she’d go if she were gonna leave me. Then I’d comb through the police blotter looking for her. She had to be somewhere. Like the woman who broke into the art gallery late one night: that could be her. She’d do something like that, she was real classy and always appreciating stuff like music and art and taking me to the ballet over Christmas. Or the woman caught pissing out a bonfire on the beach? Sleeping in the crook of some old log of driftwood? Practical. A survivor. I was most like her so she must be leaving me messages, even if I had to search for them, and so I’d start making up stories about her until I couldn’t tell what was real and what was just me. And then the worst happened—the stories overtook the memories I did have.
Jace had a truck so he’d pick me up at the end of my driveway during icy October and we’d comb the streets downtown. My eyes would get sore looking for her. “What was that back there?” I’d say, pointing towards one of the alleys. Jace would turn and shine his lights into the corner and a cat would come jumping out. Or one of the kids we used to go to high school with would pull a blond head up and drag her away. Or an old man would flip us off with blackening fingers, dark nails. But she was nowhere, nowhere. And every night it got colder, I swear.

“Are you sure she doesn’t have someone to stay with?” he asked me.

I would bite my nails in his passenger seat and he’d pull my hands away like that would calm me. I’d pull his hand to my lips instead and bite down—hard, until he let go and I went back to chewing them.

“I don’t know,” I would have to answer.

“Doesn’t she have friends from high school?”

“I’ve tried Carrie. And the Engles.” She was nowhere, nowhere.

“Would she…leave?”

“She has nowhere to go, she has no money to go there.”
“What about your aunt?” I’d accidentally told Jace about my mother’s sister down in Portland once. He was convinced.

“She’s not down there.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s here. I just know.” I got past the nails and started peeling my cuticles back, nail polish getting stuck between my teeth. “Besides, I have a swim meet this weekend and—“

“Wait,” he stopped me. “You think she’s going to show up?”

I stopped answering him, then. My hands shook as I let myself out of the door and I didn’t say goodbye.

Jace asked hard questions. He’d ask me things about her, details I should’ve remembered that I didn’t. He kept reminding me of all the ways I’d failed as her daughter, how I’d fail to remember her favorite color or where she’d shop for food. When he’d bring that stuff up I’d want to push myself out of the car and run until I got to the water. I could crash through the ice and go faster in the saline, in the cold. The trouble with going into the water is that you always have to come back out. I’d get reminded of the weight my body had again and again, every time.
I was making him crazy and I wanted to. I wanted him and then I didn’t, I picked at him until he walked away, then I’d run after him, throwing my body into his like wildfire flames. He kept trying to get me to talk through things with him, put his damned listening face on, and I’d try my best to laugh at it. Laugh, then turn away quick.

Some women will tell you that it’s sex—that’s the sure-fire way to get any damn thing you want. A nice withholding, they’ll say, works wonders. But I know better. Men are just men. They just got fleshes and blood like the rest of us. All I really had to do was let him know I wouldn’t always be there. A threat to leave—I knew that’d keep anybody in line.

I called my aunt and begged her to fly me down over Christmas break. I knew my mom wouldn’t be there but I had to check. Swim season was over and I fucked it up and didn’t finish with good enough times for state. I couldn’t stay in the house with Dad and his girlfriend for three weeks without school and I’d lost all my leads on Mom and Jace was fading into someone I watched myself shutting up around.

I’d been to Portland before but never by myself. Dad dropped me off and I couldn’t read whether he was relieved or sad to see me go. I sat in the airport with my walkman on and watched all the busy people walk by. They seemed so purposeful, so
hell bent on getting to all the good places. It was so easy to forget about all those other worlds out there. The plane touched down in a steady drizzle and everything smelled like rain and I forgot it was wintertime.

My aunt had her own flat with two dogs and her own business. She’d been doing so well for herself. So lonely, though. I looked through the house when she’d go to work for signs of my mom, for signs she had been there. I’d look through my aunt’s notebooks, her to-do lists, all her old photos. There was one photo I especially loved with the two of them as girls, out on the homestead, sitting on a log of driftwood. Behind them the beach stretched on and on. They smiled at the camera but their smiles were so different—my mother, the older one, something darker in her eyes, a question towards the camera. My aunt grinned without three teeth, her smile nearly splitting her face apart, her eyes squinting. They were happy in the photo. I folded it in half and stuffed it in my bra.

We sat there one night, her stretched out on the floor with the dogs, me watching her from the couch. We drank a lot of beer together that trip. I had had enough to finally work up the nerve to ask her what I’d been meaning to.

“You haven’t heard from Mom, have you?”

My aunt shook her head, not looking up at me.
“You don’t know where she is?”

“Hattie,” she said, looking down at Bear the dog. “Do you really want to see her again? You really want her back?”

Her answered stunned me, sent me reeling back for a second. I steadied my shaking hand on the arm of the couch. I opened my mouth. Closed it.

“You know that I love her. That’s not what I meant to say.” It was quiet for awhile then. I got caught up in trying to imagine their childhood, which made me sad deep in my chest. I tried to keep my breathing steady. One of the dogs kept scratching his neck with his back leg, a frantic ticking.

“Alaskan women,” she said real sad, “they’re the salt of the earth. The pillars. They hold everybody up. Who wanders into the woods? Who shoots up their family cabins? Who drowns in their own spit in the park?” She paused, tapping her nicely painted fingernails on her beer can. I looked down at my own fingers, bleeding on the edges. “Alaskan men never deserve the women they get.”

She ran her fingers through the deep black fur of Bear. She sighed, looked out her window at the dark lights of the city. Then she glanced at me, glanced away. I didn’t get what she was trying to tell me. I could see something being drawn out slow in yellow
crayon across her pretty face, almost invisible, a building of escape and pain maybe some
lines of joy and I wanted to ask her if she was happy, or was she lonely, did she miss our
hometown, did she miss her sister, my mother—did she miss her like I did?

“But everybody’s gotta get someone, I guess,” she finished. No, I thought, but she
stood up and walked to the sink and the moment was over.

My aunt offered me to stay as long as I wanted, but I knew I had to go back.
School was starting up again soon. What if she’d shown up while I was gone? What if
she came looking for me and I wasn’t where I’d always been?

When I got back, Jace had a girlfriend: LeAndré. The consensus was that she was
a much better fit. She was much kinder and sweeter and didn’t do things to people just
because she could. I tried not to watch them in the hallways but Jace would always look
up and make eye contact with me, which I hated him for, and then he’d smile, and I hated
him even more. There was no way I was even going to try to get him back. I do not do
things like that.

Every day I’d drive to school in a fog and get there and realize I couldn’t even
remember how I made it there. Every day I’d have to go back into that building with the
whales hanging over my head and my rage would bubble up and over. I’d carve cryptic messages into the walls when people weren’t looking. If I was left alone in the pottery studio I’d let things other people made fall to the floors, their unglazed figures cracking into small worthless clay. During PE I would head into the cages with my pocketknife and hack up the volleyballs. No one escaped, and no one was the target, and so everyone was.

I started imagining what it’d be like to torch the whole damn place, to set it all on fire, to watch it burn straight to the dead frozen leaves under all those layers of ice and snow. It’s like we’d finally be warm again. All the people watching me would run away from me. I’d have visions like this just walking down the gray carpeted hallways. What a little gasoline would do to a place like that. A path shooting up behind me as everybody screamed. Then I’d laugh maniacally, like those evil bitches in the movies, the ones who go down swinging. Crunching through charcoal remains and looking out over all my destruction.

I used to get visions like this when I was younger, back before I had boobs. The only real thing my father ever did for me besides feed me and teach me how to sing outlaw country songs was to make sure I was distracted if mom was having one of her
spells. Once he even took me to Hawaii with his flouncy girlfriend and gave me my own room for a few weeks. But I’d get so cooped up in those walls. Felt like a cockroach myself—slow, grouchy. In the middle of the night, even though the neighborhood wasn’t great and even though they’d warned me about all the natives getting worked up over white girls like me, I’d sneak out. I’d jump in the ocean without checking for an undertow. I’d swim and swim until I could barely see the shore anymore. I’d look up and see two moons—one in the sky, one on the water, and I felt like it was trying to tap-tap open up my chest. I felt weightless and light and my insides ached. When I’d make it back to the shore I realized how heavy my body was, the way it pulled towards the ground, and I’d look down at my hands and touch my face and I’d just be crying. Crying wasn’t much of a thing I did. And then the visions would come of some tourist or native coming up to me there at that beach and shooting me straight through the heart with a handgun they pulled out of their purse, their overalls. And I’d drift off into the water laughing, feeling so good.

But in these visions, Jace would be outside the school as it burned, crouched, sitting on the yellow grass. The flames would be casting all this orange light on his face, and I’d hear them licking higher. He’d have on a hoodie, maybe purple or gray. He’d just
make eye contact with me and wouldn’t look away. Even if I screamed or pushed him or tried to get a rise out of him or started taking off all my clothes, he’d just look right at me.

“Hattie,” he’d say in his quiet voice. “Slow down.”

He used to say that to me all the time. Slow down.

The visions went on for months—straight into the darkest part of the winter.

Usually I spent the months of February and March hiding from my mom, and so I remembered all that and the search died a little bit. Maybe my aunt was right. Since Jace was a big part of those visions I felt it my duty to tell him about them. I had a mind to make sure he understood the weight of it. I brought it up in casual company, at some party or something, or maybe if we ran into each other at the grocery store, sometimes even in front of other people, sometimes even in front of his girlfriend. That was a little bit of a thrill for me. He’d look at me a little nervous, and then he’d laugh, trying to get me to laugh with him because then it’d mean it was a joke, and when I didn’t, he’d get that solemn look on his face.

I kept bugging him about it, needling him, picking away at all the layers.

He never even told me it was a stupid idea, and knew better than to say I wouldn’t do it. He never even reacted, really, just listened until I had run out of pretend details I’d
been fake-planning. Just let me keep talking about it. And soon I realized how much I liked when someone was listening. Really, tilt-your-head, nod-your-teeth, wide eyes and quiet goddamn stares. Jace did that. And he’d been trying to do that for awhile.

I pulled up to the parking lot one afternoon after sleeping in and saw him waiting for me outside. He grabbed my arm when I tried to walk past him. I thought about people accidentally looking out the windows, then, all the rumors that would circle back to the girlfriend. I didn’t want that. But he held out a pack of matches to me.

“I’ve got enough gasoline,” he said, grinning his stupid cute grin.

“What do you think I’m gonna do with that?”

“I’m not lighting it.”

I had to keep walking because I knew if I paused, if I stopped, I might just pick up those matches and start some spark I didn’t want. Jace didn’t call after me, didn’t say “I knew you wouldn’t do it” or even “Told you so”—maybe because he really did believe I might. Suddenly he was next to me, and he linked his arm in mine and kept up with my stride and I could smell a familiar warm smell that washed over me, and I might’ve stumbled a little bit at that. I didn’t pull away.
One day we were sitting in his truck parked at the beach.

“I broke up with Lee,” he said quietly, lighting up a cigarette. “You want one?”

“No.” I looked at him. “Why?”

“We weren’t a great match,” he said, smiling a little. “If you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. Explain.” I looked back out at the water. It was low tide and the grey beach stretched on and on, out farther. Spring was coming. You could smell it in the air—fertilizer, like shit, as the permafrost underneath the yellowing grass melted back to dirt. Everyone loved to complain about break-up season but it was my favorite. The light was coming back. I didn’t care about the smell if I could feel sun on my face.

“What do you want out of this life, Hattie?” he asked, looking right at me.

“Fuck off,” I said, impatient, trying to get him stop looking at me. He was waiting for me to say something. I tapped my feet on the dash, trying to get them to move without moving, and looked back out at the water.

“I got options,” I said then, coolly. A shiver ran up my arm from the wind off the water.

“I bet you do.” He grinned at me. “Keeping me out of them, huh?”

I turned and looked at him, glared hard.
“You want some sort of love confession out of me?”

“Not what I asked.”

It was quiet for awhile. I started getting caught up in my own thoughts again when he said, “You’ll figure it out. Probably going to leave me in the dust when you finally run away from this place.”

“Says you,” I said real quick back. But a flash of my mother had surfaced—the first in awhile. After Portland I’d tried to move on, tried not to think of her so much. She couldn’t find me if I left, though. She wouldn’t know where to look if she wanted to call me up one day way down the line.

I remembered my aunt, then, what she had said about women and the men they get. I tried hard to remember the way it was early on, before all the spells, the trouble, my father’s face twisting in on itself. I could never remember a time when she didn’t have that darkness in her, when she’d ever felt wholly there to me, a time when I felt she’d always be there.

But Jace would. And even if he was a man, even if he did go crazy years and years later like they sometimes did in February when the winter stretched on and on, even if he did shoot up our cabin or try to hurt our babies, at least I’d have his family. Jace
was, after all, a Moreno—came from a big good working family and money, a fishing
dynasty. It was maybe the only thing he loved more than me. I liked that. It made me
breathe easier. I knew there’d always be something more important, something more
pressing, like I wouldn’t have to be the spotlight. Being someone’s everything seemed
like way too much work, way too much responsibility, and that was maybe why I stuck
around with him.

I looked across the car at Jace, then, and I guess I decided. Better to end up with a
choice on a man who maybe did understand my wilderness. At least there was more after
that choice, at least I wasn’t at the end of a string.

I kept quiet about it, though. I know not to spook a man. Even one as constant as
Jace Moreno.

As soon as school was out I flew out to Jace’s daddy’s boat for a few weeks to see
him and to help out. Lou only let me cook, the bastard, even though I knew I could work
just as hard as the next person. Man was picky as hell, too.

For someone who thought they loved water, the boat did not suit me. We’d wake
up in the morning and be surrounded by water. Miles and miles of it. Sometimes, because
Lou’s a goddamn grouch, we’d never even see another boat—let alone land. It reversed me. It got me all fucked up. I kept trying to jump in when we’d anchor up, but Jace would catch me stripping off my clothes and pull me back.

“Look,” he’d say, pointing to the way the current would rip around a buoy. “You jump in and we’ll never see you again.”

“Well,” I said, “That’d suit you, wouldn’t it.”

He rolled his eyes at me and pulled me back downstairs, back to the cabin, away from all the air. He did not understand why I was being such a pill and frankly, neither did I. We’d fuck on the lead line after everyone went to sleep and I’d have jellyfish burns up and down my back and I’d just be crying, then. Jace thought it was from the burns but it was from inside me, too, and when I’d try to get on top he wouldn’t let me. He didn’t want anybody to see me, was what he said about that.

About two weeks in I slipped my panties off beneath my skirt and sat on deck. I spread my legs and watched his deckhands’ eyes get wide and then the young ones turned red but the older ones tried to make eye contact with me. I pushed dark shades over my nose and slouched up the ladder, daring them to look.
Jace came running back from the skiff and pulled my hand towards him, furious at me, not even trying to understand anymore. I turned around and slapped him, once, the first time, the only time. He took my hands and held them behind my back as I squirmed, yelling. When I yelled at Jace on the boat no one ever came running, no one ever came to check on us.

“You’ve got to get your shit together,” he whispered, furious.

“What happened to ‘Slow down’?” And then he’d walk away. As soon as he did I went back to the deck and spread my legs. I smiled down at the magazine I was pretending to read.

Lou came barreling out of the cabin, making the floor shake. He grabbed me by the shoulders and started dragging me down to the galley. He threw me down the stairs and I landed—hard—on the dirty floor. My skirt came up and my face flushed hot. One of the only times I remember being embarrassed so bad. Jace tried to follow him down the ladder but he yelled at him to get out. I heard the door slam. Fear rushed down my back and I scrambled up.

“Sit. Down.” His voice was slow, gritting. I sat. The galley table, like a booth at a casual restaurant, felt cool and wet against my skin. The plastic coating around the
cushions stuck to my legs. The air down there was always stuffy, always moist, trying to suffocate me.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing,” he said quietly through his teeth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I spit out, trying not to show the fear on my face, trying to hold that back. Being pissy helped with that.

“If you think—“ he started, “If you think for one second I will put up with this fucking cunt-like behavior, you’re a goddamn stupid cunt.”

“That’s me,” I stated coolly. “Maybe we could get a t-shirt for me. ‘Goddamn stupid cunt.’ I’ll wear it for you, Lou, if that’s what you want.”

He looked at me, a little stunned, I think, but then the cool anger returned to his eyes.

“You will not behave this way on my boat. Not in front my deckhands. Not in front of my goddamn son. And trust me when I tell you that you will never see him again if this continues.”

“What a shame,” I said loudly over the silence. “What a shame, how I’ll miss him and this whole goddamn piece-of-shit boat. How will I ever survive!” I was yelling, then,
and then it dawned on me that probably no one had ever yelled at Lou, and I could see
that for a second on his face, but then he pinched his eyes together into a glare.

He moved his arms across the wide berth of the booth, trapping me in. I tried to
catch his eye but he wouldn’t look at me, then, wouldn’t even give me a look. A wave of
fear passed down my back again and I realized I was sweating. He was towering over me.

I couldn’t move.

“They think…” he started out more quietly. “They think every mother fucker
out here who watches you and your fine ass doesn’t see you? You think they don’t see all
the mess that you are?”

I watched him, keeping my eyebrows down, making sure not to blink.

“You think you’re really hiding it all that well?” he asked. Then, “Answer me.”

“I’m not hiding anything,” I said, my voice still strong. If I lost that then I’d lose
it, I’d lose it. I cleared my throat just in case it tried to waver.

“Yeah,” he said. “You’ve got it bad. You think you got it so bad you’re gonna
make it bad for everybody else around you, huh?”
He waited, saying nothing. The sweat dripped down my back and my face felt flushed. He waited. I could feel my skin shrinking over me, making myself smaller and smaller.

He looked me in the eye again. I saw something different, something new, a spark of darkness, a memory.

“You listen to me, and you better fucking listen,” he said. A vein in his forehead moved, a slow pulse. “I got kids on this boat who never knew their moms. I’ve had kids, full grown men, cry right the fuck in front of me. Abandoned kids. Worse than what you got. Kids whose folks were drunks. Dad cheated on their mom and left them at bus stations. Kids whose folks left ‘em on an island with their brothers before they even knew how to take care of each other yet. Maybe all they gave ‘em in life was a shotgun and a box of dried milk, a goddamn tarp, is all.”

He straightened and I flinched, but he turned towards the bunks, pulled a sheet off Jace’s bed. He threw it at me. It hit me straight in the chest, a wad of cotton, moist and familiar. Something had changed. He wasn’t going to hurt me, wasn’t going to kick me off, wouldn’t hold me down or lock me up or let me jump into the swirling current that pulled girls in. He looked sad, himself. He looked like he’d never cried in all his life,
never even let himself be touched, and then I felt tears forming in my eyes. He looked at me and saw my face squeezing together, big fat rollers forming and skidding down my cheeks, and he quickly looked away. He cleared his throat.

“Put on some goddamn clothes,” he said. “And don’t even think about pulling that shit show again, or else I’ll just throw you into the hold. You’ll get a ride to the island and you can make your own fucking way home, then.”

He left me in the cabin. I shakily wrapped the sheet around my shoulders, smelling Jace’s hair and fish scales and traces of detergent. I breathed it in as I gulped for air between heavy sobs. I laid back against the cool plastic booth and curled my knees into my chest, waiting for the waves to stop hitting my face, my shoulders, my body, not even trying to contain it. I laid there until my heart stopped pounding in my ears.

That night I sat on the top house and watched the sun move through the sky. The hours ticked by, never getting dark, and I tried to listen to the silence. I tried to be where I was. I tried to feel like a human, like a good person, and I tried to imagine what that would feel like.
Jace made his way up to the top house and pulled up a chair beside me. I knew he was still mad at me, I could feel it on his breath and in his limbs—all the air between us, angry.

“Who is this?” he said, holding out the picture of my mom and her sister. I’d left it on his pillow, an apology, an invitation.

I looked up at him and smiled. My face was still sticky from dried-up tears.

“That’s my mom. Her and her sister. Back on the homestead, see? Here’s the beach out east.” He looked closer.

“I’ve never been out there,” he said.

“Neither have I,” I said quietly. “Don’t they look happy, though?” I took his hand, held it softly, hitting our palms together and then intertwined my fingers. He let me but didn’t look at me. “That’s probably where she is.”

He looked up, out at the water, first, then back at me.

“Why didn’t we go look out there, then? You—you thought she’d be out there?”

I sighed and felt my throat constrict, felt tears welling up again.

“It’s not a…place I ever want to go to, actually,” I said, clearing my throat. “It’s not a good place. And she’s not…good, if that’s where she is.”
“What do you mean?”

“It was a homestead,” I said, looking down at our hands. “It was a homestead and they were the only girls, and there was no one around. And she made sure nothing ever happened to her sister. She took it all herself, instead.”

Jace held out the picture again and we both looked at it.

I told him about how she used to push my bangs up across my face and hold my chin up to a lamp. She’d brush her fingers across my eyes and blow on them to keep them closed. “Can you feel the light in you?” she’d ask. “Right here, behind your eyelids?” And if it was even a little bit sunny, even in below-zero temperatures, we’d sit on the porch and tilt our faces up to the sunlight. Two sunflowers.

“But those were the good days,” I told Jace. “Because if the sun hid behind the clouds or if it was winter and it never made it all the way through our woods, and if she forgot to take her vitamins…she’d relive all that. She’d remember it all vividly, and she’d treat us like we were there. Like Dad was her dad, and I was her sister.”

She became an animal, groaning in the corner of the house and gnawing on her hands. Dad and I had to hold her down and give her milk, bananas, anything. She’d call me Helen and dig her nails into him, taking swings at him when he’d get too close to me.
Get away from her, she’d growl, and I’d be so scared, then, because I just wanted to be close to him.

“Hattie,” Jace said quietly.

“Don’t say it, Jace,” I said.

The sun was coming up already, early summer mornings, so much daylight. I felt that and I felt alive. I let my shoulders droop. I closed my eyes and lifted my face up to the sun and then I remembered my mother something fierce.

“I’m yours, okay? Shut up. I am.”
They’d left three hours ago and the GPS still said over two left—not what Gweneviere had expected for just a weekend camping trip. The dog in the back lurched every corner Sully took, so that sometimes she felt her body tense up and she tried not to flinch. Leaves scattered the pot-holed road. There was always a “crick” it seemed, winding its way next door, up and down the hills and hollers.

“Is that a holler?” she asked, smiling and pointing to the dip. She’d walked into one when she first moved to Appalachia for school and she’d felt the chill left on her skin long after she’d walked back out. She preferred wide open swaths, looking down on things, seeing the sun rise and fall.

“That’s a holla,” Sully said.

“Why don’t you say ‘holler’ anymore? I mean, isn’t that what they call it?”

“You know,” he started, his face thoughtful. “When they told me it was pronounced ‘hollow’ back in grade school, I guess I didn’t realize how ignorant I sounded.”

“It’s not ignorant,” she protested. “It’s a culture! It’s not like anyone calls them ‘hollow,’ do they? So fuck the rules, really. It’s not ignorant.”

He looked at her.

“As I was saying…”

“Sorry.”
“Don’t be.” He grabbed her hand from across the console. “Hollow doesn’t sound right either. Holla seems like a nice compromise.”

“Oh, okay,” she conceded. “I’m probably going to say holler though, is that okay?”

“You can say whatever you want.” He was adamantine, his voice raising a little bit.

“Okay, I will.”

He laughed and squeezed her hand.

They were new at this, is the way she described it to her friends. It was still new and so sometimes they were overtly polite to each other instead of saying what they meant. By now she thought this would’ve gone away—she’d tried to sass it out of him, that innate politeness that drove her crazy. But there he was. Being all polite and shit. She felt bad if she didn’t dish it back, and so they went from being apologetically dancing around tough conversations to nearly nipping at each other’s ears when they played around.

Still, though, she was grateful. She couldn’t imagine how hard it would’ve been to get to know him if she hadn’t been on the boat this past summer. If they’d had to start from scratch—from first date awkwardness to real conversation.

First there was the moment when he was out on deck reading a book. That had stopped her in her very tracks. Never before had she seen a man in boots and bibs reading a damn book—a hunting book, but still. Lou bossing him around, and then Sully following him around like a puppy. It was a sight to see a seven-foot man, hands the size
of a sea star, following around an old stooping captain, almost licking the backs of Lou’s heels.

Then came all the moments that fell into place, when she stood too close to him on deck, tying knots, mending nets, watching his hands move quickly and efficiently, the dimpled grin he’d give. They’d started passing notes across the deck—folded sweaty notebook sheets that could only be written in the dark of a bunk when the rest of the crew was asleep, her headlamp lighting up the corner of the notebook. Then there was the conversation they’d had after three weeks of a terribly busy schedule where she said something like, “Damn, I need to shave my legs real bad,” and Sully had said, “Eh, probably keep you warm under that rain gear, huh?” and grinned at her, and this had surprised her more than anything else, and there they were. That had done it.

“Have you talked to Lou lately?”

“I’ve called him every day since I left. No answer.” He shook his head.

“Oh my god, what? Sully.” She leaned forward in her seat and looked at him. “Is it always like this?”

“Just about. He asked me to check in. So I’ve been checking in.”

“But he hasn’t answered.”

“Not so far. I mean, far as I know, he’s been calling me back. I get spotty service down here and he knows that. I’ve let him know that.”

“You know what this sounds like, don’t you? This is like… crazy ex-girlfriend status. This is… beyond crazy. Manipulative! He makes you call him everyday and then
doesn’t even care? So absurd. Would you put up with that in a woman? No, I’ll answer for you, no you would not Sullivan James.”

“Frankly, I don’t give a rat’s ass whether he picks up or not. It’s all better for me if he doesn’t. He thinks he’s got me under some kind of control, like I’m going to feel bad about it. It’s funny because I don’t.”

She looked suspiciously over at him, across the bridge of her nose. A likely story. Lou did have him under control. He was the superstar deckhand. The stories Sully told about the times Lou knew he wanted to be somewhere, and purposely kept Sully later, just so he missed out. Or how Lou made him feel bad for doing what he wanted. Or would call him a pussy. Then expect him to live on the boat, take care of the engine room, watch for leaks, even running the back deck for all Lou’s friends who wanted to catch king salmon. He was the dog Lou kicked, and she’d watched it go on all summer. She tapped her fingers on the dashboard, thinking of this, stewing all over again.

“You’re not really going to quit, are you? Nobody acts that way when they’re going to quit.” She looked over at him, glaring slightly.

“I just don’t want to break any bridges I don’t have to,” he said, and took her hand. She nodded. That was probably wise. “Definitely quitting.”

She still didn’t believe him. It felt more like he was convincing himself just as much as he was convincing her. He’d been doing this ranting lately—putting space between himself and the captain. She understood. It was hard to cut ties with someone who’d been more like a father than the sonofabitch that beat him up every damn summer.
But the more she learned… the more she felt lucky. Lucky of many things, but in this case, lucky that she worked for Lou’s brother, and not for the Devil Himself. She understood more and more the lengths that people would go to survive.

“Okay, hungry. Getting hungry.” He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

“I have snacks. Do you want an apple?”

“I need food,” he growled towards her, smiling.

He pulled over to the side of the road on a particularly nasty curve, the dog thumping back into their seats. He apologized and apologized. Gwen pet her puppy on the head, then turned to look at where they’d stopped.

“You wanna eat here?”

“Yeah, better place as any I’d imagine.” He paused. “Does this not look good to you?”

“It’s great! Looks just fine.” She slammed the door behind her and looked up at the sign.

JETSON’S it said, a letter missing in there, but she couldn’t make out what it was meant to say. The place was huge. A burial ground of rusty tractor parts rested beside it. People outside milled about, walked down to the creek on the other side. They were in another holler, she suspected, the air cool beneath where the sun didn’t quite reach.

She halted inside. The walls and shelves were dusty and odd-looking people milled about. She didn’t mean to be judgmental, really, but people around here just
looked odd, they just did. The food looked foreign, a moist musty coating drifted through to the back of her throat—a taste, a smell, she didn’t know. They made their way back to the bathrooms. Rotten eggs and sweet berry soap.

“What smells so awful?” she whispered to him on her way out.

“There’s sulfur in the water.”

They plopped down at the long outstretched counter. She had a moment’s thought that they should order to go, but then remembered that they were in no hurry, and couldn’t be—they were in West Virginia, now.

“Can you drink it?” she asked as a slow-moving waitress plopped down two styrofoam cups filled with a yellow liquid. Water where she came from was the color of the cup it came in.

“We used to have water like this. Taste isn’t great. I used to put ketchup in it, make tomato soup.”

She laughed.

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope.”

She stopped laughing and looked at him again. Because he’d been so hungry. Not for fun. She looked away. It was like when he ate the inside seeds of the peppers she sliced, or when he cringed if she went to throw away the slivers of cabbage from their salad. Rotting food from her fridge. He touched her hand. They smiled at each other
slightly sad. She imagined that he hated the look of pity as much as she hated giving it, but sometimes she had no other faces for his stories.

They ordered and sat waiting. People looked tired here. Something was off. She mentioned this to him: why does it feel so different?

“No one has their phone out,” he supplied.

She looked around. It was true. She hadn’t even thought of looking at hers—no service in the holler, anyway.

“No, thank you.” He watched her. She smiled, he smiled. He never ate anything unnecessary, unhealthy.

“Oh, please have some. Here. Have some. Have a Smartie.” She opened one for him and put it in front of his folded arms. He muffled a laugh and picked up two pieces of candy. His fingers encompassed them, thick and tan, quicker than they looked like they should be.
A couple walked in—an older white-haired man and a dirty-blond woman. They looked around for a second along the counter bar, only a few seats left.

“Can we sit here?” he asked them.

“Of course,” said Gwen. “Scootch right in here. Not a problem at all.” She smiled at him, a big smile, one breaking her face open. One thing she loved about these places were the boisterous greetings which people carried on their sleeves. There was no stranger danger, not in these small meeting moments. Sully was from here, and she knew that he missed that openness in people’s eyes. But he didn’t miss the violence, and he didn’t miss the on-guard protectiveness that she couldn’t possibly understand. No one had ever tried to get her out of her car in the middle of the night to steal it. No one had ever snuck into her driveway and siphoned the gas out of her lawn mower. The stories he told.

“Would you like a Smartie?”

“Oh, no, thank you.”

“Don’t give him one of those,” the woman said from across his body. “Won’t make him any smarter, let me tell you.”

He took the Smartie.

“When I was a kid,” he started, “I used to just stuff the whole thing in my mouth. Sometimes two or three.”

“What. Well, you’d better do that, then,” she said and laughed. She could see Sully move out of the corner of her eye, shifting into her vision.
The man unwrapped the candy, then, hands shaking, moved the roll to his mouth. Only one piece rolled away, down to the floor. He stooped, picked it up, and popped it in his mouth. She laughed again.

“Good work! Childhood not needed.”

“Well aren’t you friendly. Are you from around here?” the man asked.

“Nope,” she smiled. “We’re from Alaska. Well, Sully here is from Hurricane, but I was born and raised up north. We met up there.”

“You don’t say? And now you’re all the way down in West Virginia. Seems like a mistake.”

Sully stepped in to explain.

“Good ol’ fishing boat romance story.”

“You seen those bear traps over there,” the man said, pointing towards the far end of the store. “You ever seen a bear trap?”

“I haven’t,” she said, blushing, knowing that she should have.

“That must be what you used, huh?”

“Excuse me?”

“Used to catch him. She put a bear-trap out for ya?” he said to Sully, laughing. He kept laughing. Sully laughed too, squeezing her hand. She tried to laugh but ended up clenching his fist too hard.
“We were just saying how great it is to see everybody looking at each other around here,” Sully said. He talked across her body. She let herself shrink back so they could see each other. “Nobody has their phone out.”

“A damn revelation, isn’t it? Absolutely awful, if you ask me. People don’t even know how to talk to each other anymore. I got a friend with a son, he’s—oh, eleven, twelve. Can’t hold a damn conversation. You ask him something, he already forgot the question.” The man waited for them to react.

“Oh, I know,” she started. “It’s pretty amazing.”

Someone sat down on Sully’s other side, struck up a conversation. Gwen tried to make eye contact with the woman behind the man, tried to make her engage, too. The woman wouldn’t look over.

“It’s like the world today,” the man went on. “You know what we used to do? We used to work hard. Kids these days don't know how to work hard, I’ll tell you that.” He began to tell a story. She couldn’t help but zone back into their summer, the sore muscles—the awful smell that stayed in her rain gear and those early mornings, twilight nights delivering the fish to the tender. Sully was the hardest worker she knew. She sighed and tuned in again, stopping him.

“Okay, now wait.” She smiled all cheerful. “You’ve really got to tell me the story of how you two met, if we told you ours.” She smiled and waited for the woman behind him to hear. “First, though,” she stopped again. “I’m Gweneviere. This is Sully. What are your names?”
“Ray,” boomed the man. “This here’s Jeannie.”

“Well? What’s the story here. You guys been together awhile? How long have you known each other?”

“That’s a story,” said Jeannie. “Let Ray tell it. He’s full of shit, anyway.”

Jeannie still wouldn’t engage with her. She didn’t understand. She looked back at Sully, who was wildly engaged and laughing robustly at the older woman on the other side of him. Alaska, again. They were talking weather.

“Oh, boy. Well, let me first start with Jeannie and her first husband. First husband? A total jackass.” Ray started in on the story. Gwen waited for Jeannie to react but she didn’t. She was quiet, instead, looking straight ahead of her, and let Ray tell her story. “Used to just sleep and watch TV. Didn’t have a job. Never even talked with her and her boy. Not much of a father, if you know what I mean.” Sully turned at that, slouching.

“So what happened?” she asked.

“Well, Jeannie was lonely. She’d been searching for something, let me tell you. Every Thursday night she’d come down to Al’s Diner down on 4th street. You know about Al’s diner?”

She looked around and shrugged, waiting to explain that they were just passing through.

“Well me and a buddy would be in Al’s Diner every Thursday, it’s Karaoke night. Checking out the ladies. I was talking to this woman, Rhonda, at the time, and things
were going good. Rhonda, oh, let me tell you about her. She lived on this street, let me tell you the name. I kid you not, this is funny—Guilty Road.”

“No.”

“Oh yes. Guilty Road.” He leaned in and put his arm up on her shoulder. She nodded him on. “What a joke. So I followed Rhonda home one night, and I’m sitting at these crossroads, and I looked up at the sign name, and I say, can’t do that. No, I couldn’t do it. Some kind of omen or something, right?”

“Um, it must be. That’s absurd!” She sat up straight, trying to drop the hand that had found her shoulder. It gripped her tighter than she’d thought. She tried to smile.

“So I call my buddy and we head back to the diner. And there’s Jeannie. All run down, still sticking it out. She says she’s gotta leave for the night, so we let her. We’re hanging out ’til closing time, and heading out of the parking lot, who do we pass by?”

“Jeannie?” she asked in a small voice. His hand dropped off her shoulder so he could motion with his hands.

“Sleeping in her van. I knock on the window, say, girl? What you doing here? You can’t sleep here, I tell her. But she’d been doing that, yeah. She’d been doing that awhile and never told anyone. But it’s dangerous, we tell her. You go home, I told her, and you tell that husband of yours you’re leaving. You get out of there. Come stay at my place.”

“And did she?”
“She did. For awhile. Got her own place eventually, but we’ve been friends ever since.”

“What?” A cold spiderweb across her neck, a realization.

“I’m his wingman, believe it or not,” Jeannie said through her mug of coffee. Sully hadn’t said anything on the other side of her, but she could feel him fidgeting. No, something was wrong. This was all wrong. A turn had happened. Had Sully heard?

“She’s the best wingman I got,” he said, winking at Gwen. Another cold hand on her chest. Ice ran through her. “She’s perfect for taking out now and then, if you now what I mean.”

“Where’s our food, anyway?” She redirected her body towards Sully. He made long eye contact her. She rolled her eyes softly and quickly, strategically moving her body away, moving back towards him.

“It’s getting a little ridiculous, isn’t it.” He kept watching her. Her face was hot, or moving, and something felt terrible in the pit of her stomach. She grabbed his hand.

“What’d you guys order? We got the pizza. Best thing on the menu, hands down.” Ray was still talking.

She turned back towards him even though she didn’t want to. She let her shoulder brush Sully’s, trying to move closer without betraying the closeness to those around her.

“You guys come here a lot?” she said, talking past Ray towards Jeannie. Jeannie didn’t look at her.
“Now and then,” Ray answered. “It’s a good place. Good people around here. Don’t get the chicken, though. Did you get the chicken?”

“No,” she said, surprised.

“Ohh, I tell you what they do to chickens these days just makes me sick. We used to raise ‘em ourselves, you know. Imagine killing a chicken, then roasting it that very night. That’s what we did.” His hand found her shoulder again. This time she flinched, moving away from him. He noticed, made eye contact with her.

Again, the boat flashed back at her. Fish still wriggling as she cut into their ripely bloodful bodies. A spurt of red, a tail flip, blood freckles on her face. Shooting moose, deer, ptarmigan, filling the freezer. She took a sip of her water. She forgot how bad it tasted, wanted to spit it back out, looked at Sully, her face betraying all that distress. He matched her expression and then just looked so damn concerned. Her face felt hot again, a fresh wave.

“Now they just keep ‘em in cages, little cages where they can’t move much.” Ray seemed undisturbed at her motion backwards. “Get ‘em nice and fat for you, shoot them up with hormones. Hormones make girls hit puberty at something like nine, now, did you know that? All coming from our hormonal meat.”

She sighed. It wasn’t worth answering. She did not want to be here anymore.

“If you want to try a good chicken,” he continued, “you come back to my place. You’ve got to taste what real meat is like.”
She swallowed, hard, and turned to make eye contact with Sully, hoping and dreading that he had heard. He was watching her, his face contorted into anger, disbelief—dramatic and wild, his eyebrows furrowing into a violent nest. She kept her face calm, unrelenting, trying not to betray any fear to Ray or especially Sully. Everything was fine, here.

The waitress made her way towards them, a welcome relief.

“Thank you so much,” Sully said to her. His demeanor switched on and off like that, she’d noticed. The waitress smiled and walked back towards the kitchen.

They started devouring, ignoring Ray as he kept talking towards them. She swirled her fries in ketchup, trying not to slow, not to leave her mouth empty. Quiet. He stopped talking. They didn’t say anything, just kept chewing and swallowing. She suddenly felt Sully’s energy—anxious, fidgeting, trying to move away. They needed to get back on the road, yes. They needed to drive away, and quickly. It was contagious energy, his fury.

They stood, and without much show or ceremony, quickly said goodbye and backed away. Sully said goodbye to the woman on the other side. They made their way up to the register. There was a line. On either side of them, junk food lined the shelves.

She leaned into him, tried to fit her chin into the dip in his chest. Where his father had stomped, broken, where it had gone unhealed. A small sort of dip that you couldn’t see through a shirt, but could feel. Just perfect for her chin.
“What the fuck!” he started. She could feel his agitation, his heat, through his cotton tee.

“Awful. What was that, like, an hour?” She was so tired.

“Oh, at least. What was up with that guy, though? He just talked and talked to you. I think he liked you,” he said lightly, trying to tease.

“Don’t say that, please,” she said, her eyes meeting his. She turned away. She placed her fingers on a package of Hershey bars, moving her fingers up and down the brown paper.

He waited for her, then turned her back around. For some reason, tears dotted her eyes. She tried to laugh.

“You know? That sort of thing happens to me all the time.”

“Really? What, like, people talking to you?”

“No, like…that. Like…like I’ll be in the post office, just minding my own business, waiting in line. And without fail a man will… well, an old man will come up and talk to me, just talk to me about anything. Tell me his life story. Tell me what kind of things I should be doing with my life. Like they ask you a question…” Her hands moved to tell this story, her right arm moving out in a straight line to explain. “…and then they tell you how you could do it better. Or they… want to know, and then, say…” she trailed off. She wasn’t explaining it right.

He pulled her in.

“Are you okay?”
“Yeah.” She breathed deep, trying to calm her hands, her chest still fluttering.

“Yeah.”

He pulled away to pay and she felt cold again. Drained. She looked around at this place, peeked over the aisles. Ray and Jeannie still sat. They weren’t talking to each other. They waited for their food.

“Ready?” he asked. “Do you want anything else?”

“No,” she said quietly. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Hell yeah,” he said, pulling her close again, kissing the wispy hairs above her ear.

In the car, it was hard to let it go. He kept bringing it up, still furious, still agitated.

“And then he said that comment about the meat?” he said, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“But…did you feel that, earlier, with him?” she asked, not asking the right thing.

“Feel what?”

“That change. It’s so weird. Something changed. I know you were busy. It’s…it’s okay if you didn’t feel it.”

He thought for a minute, hard, trying to listen.

“Feel what exactly?”

She also thought, clenching her hands together. The trees sped by them all colors.
“Somehow, this is what happens. You see a man with a woman, and, you think, I’m safe. You think—somehow the bad behavior or the flirtatious nature of an old man is, in a sense, harmless—if he’s with a woman.”

She looked over at him and he shrugged, waiting.

“But, then… that changed. Something changed, when I knew, and I just got cold all down my spine. Even when I’m with you. Even when you’re right fucking next to me! This shit happens. It happens all the fucking time. And what do you do? What do you say?”

He was quiet a minute, then started to pull the car over. She looked at him.

“I just gotta call Lou real quick while I have service, here. Not to derail this fantastic conversation, I’m so sorry.”

“Are you serious?” She looked at him hard, disbelief splaying across her face. She tried, again, to remain calm and keep a flat affect. “Right now?”

“Yes, I’m… I’m sorry,” he said and looked over at her, waiting for her to say something else.

“Cool, well, I’ll be here,” she said. She looked out the window. He started to close the door. She glared, absent-mindedly petting the top of her dog’s head. Lou must’ve picked up because the conversation stretched on. Sitting there, a wave of exhaustion rushed through her blood, slow-moving. What a day it had been. And even now, even though she’d purposely turned her face towards the sun at the top of the valley, she still
felt the chill of the holler. Like her clothes were wet and she couldn’t try her bones out. She sighed to herself, trying to get it all out of her head.

“Sorry about that,” he said as he got back in the truck. He put his phone down.

“Well? How is Lou? Is Lou doing okay today? Sure am glad he’s the one you’re concerned about.” She couldn’t keep the tone out of her voice. He looked over at her, then started up the truck, buckling his seatbelt.

“Oh, he’s giving me all sorts of shit.”

“For what now?”

“Being here. Asked me about you.”

She blushed and didn’t mean to.

“Oh boy. Word’s out, I guess.” Even three thousand miles away, she thought. Even all this time. Small towns and the way people wanted to talk.

He looked both ways and pulled back onto the road.

“Did he say how Papa Frank’s doing? Or did you see him before you left?”

“Oh, Frank is fantastic.” He sighed. “I know that you had trouble with Frank over the summer—”

“—no!” she interrupted. “I mean, I got over that. He’s, uh... he’s awful. I hate him, sometimes, you know? Did I tell you what he said about all us ‘chicks’ out there on the boat?”

“Oh god, no you did not. Do I even want to know?”
“Well he was just commenting on how many of us ‘chicks’ there are out there now—and not wives or daughters, no, no, ‘It’s almost like they’re human!’ is what he said, really.” They both looked at each other, mouths open, and she felt a little spring of delight at his open mouth and the terrible, terrible story. They had both been in the cabin when Frank had sprung the n-word on them both, talking about his days back in the war when they used to throw pennies at ‘them.’ She cringed at the memory but still felt a little surge at relaying the story to Sully.

“That’s terrible,” he said genuinely, mournfully. She nodded.

“Something about him, though. You know, I could’ve called him out on that stuff and he would’ve listened to me, I think. He cares about what I think. I think he’s got a lot of sad stories in there. Did I tell you he decided he was going to adopt me as a granddaughter?”

“It’s very sweet,” Sully said. He looked over at her. He hesitated.

“People are complicated,” she said. “That’s what I learned this summer. I could still like him. It’s still better than being around almost everyone I know around here.”

“You don’t mean that?”

“I do. At least they still cared about me, Sully. Even El, as slick as he was. Lou, the dick. Especially Tom—they all care about me in ways that no one else does. So can I forgive them for all those flaws? I…I do, I can. It’s not their fault. Besides. It’s kind of the way of the world for women. At least this way I know I’m safe, anyway.”
He started to go into his spiel, his total frustration, blowing air out of his nostrils the way he did when he got worked up, and she grabbed his hand to stop him.

“You don’t have to tell me about it,” she said quietly. “It sucks. It’s just the way it is, and I know that it sucks.”

She rolled down her window, then, even though it was cold. She put her face out like the dog. Sully didn’t speed up or slow down. Her hair whipped in the wind flaking dances back behind her. She couldn’t hear anything. The wind moved past her ears. If he responded she couldn’t hear him, couldn’t hear anything, and the cool air reached up through her nostrils into the back of her throat and eyelids and all the light disappeared.
LAND RIGHTS

Papa Frank knew that he could keel over and croak any damn second and this certainly did not make him a more patient man. He squinted his eyes towards the driveway, willing his son, Lou, to pull up in his pick-up. That was the difference between being a young man and being an old one. Time felt so much more pressing. Of course they said that youth was wasted on the young, but that wasn’t quite it. Really, he could remember all the way to his nerve endings the feeling of absolute invincibility, maybe even bordering on immortality. The way he stood in the crow’s nest of his seiner looking out, wind rushing by him. The way he could shout and people would listen. His sons would listen. He’d stopped shouting.

“Doesn’t he know, doesn’t he know,” he muttered to himself.

But that was the thing about his sons—they didn’t know, not yet. They had moments of mortality, of failure, now and then—especially now that they had older kids, some grown and gone. But other moments still crept in where they felt big and bad, especially out on the water when they bossed him around like he was another deckhand, and that pissed Frank off more than anything.

The other thing was that people had stopped listening to him altogether. His sons, yes, but even their wives—even their children. The only people who listened anymore were the young ones out on the boats. Some of them still sat rapt at his attention as he whirled his tales around them, lying and lying and lying even. He knew that as soon as
Tom, his youngest, told him he couldn’t go out with them anymore—it’d all be over. He’d decide to say ‘fuck ‘em all’ and he’d keel over swiftly while they were all gone for the summer. It’d ruin the season, probably. His final wish.

This errand concerned Lou, and so he shouldn’t have been late. Six minutes after he’d agreed to be there, the truck crunched into the gravel driveway. Out came Frank, his legs buckling from under him now and then, pushing his glasses up his nose and squinting at the sun.

“Hey, Pop,” said Lou, opening the door for him from the inside. Frank pulled himself up and settled into the passenger’s seat.

“Late, late, a goose’s gate,” he said to his middle son.

“Sorry, Pop. Aliyah’s doll lost an eyeball. Had to get the toolbox out, show her how to fix it.”

“Hmm,” he answered. Aliyah was a little black girl and he could never believe he was related to a black girl. ‘Only half,’ Lou had told him and Regis once. He’d clapped his hands to his thighs, then clapped them together, then clenched down on his chair. Lou’s fault. What a daughter he had raised. Strong-headed. Frank never knew what to say to her.

“What’s going on, anyway, this covert bank errand you’ve got to run?”

“It’s your business, son, yes it is.”

Lou shifted into first to come to a stop, looked over at him.

“Do I have to guess?”
“Not my will, if that’s what you’re wondering. Your money’s safe. Yep.”

“Oh, Christ. I’m not worried about the will. Or the money.”

“Ohh, this you want to worry about. Damn Natives are ruining all the plans, all the plans we had.”

“Care to elaborate?” Lou said patiently.

“The land,” he hissed. “They’re trying to take the land. All those years, those lazy bastards and now they want the land.”

“Not the land we live on now?”

“That’s your land, son, no—no. The homestead. They’re trying to take the homestead.”

“What? I thought we sold that years ago. You and Regis. Thought you sold that.”

“Oh we just told you that so you’d stay away from it.”

“Like we needed motivation, pff. We’d never go back there.”

“Knew it’d be worth something, someday, we did.”

“And is it?”

“Damn lazy-ass Natives think so, don’t they? Want to take it back. Like it’s theirs. Who tilled that land, got it all ship-shape, built the cabin? Sweat and blood! Sweat and blood.”

“I wouldn’t call it ship-shape anymore, Pop.”

“Irrelevant. Absolutely. It’s about sweat and blood, son.”

Lou pulled the truck into the bank. It looked busy inside.
“Want me to go in with you then?”

“No, son, no. I can take care of it myself. Stop babying me, for Christ’s sake.” He huffed and puffed himself up out of the seat, then walked towards the bank. A woman opened the door for him, smiled and nodded him in.

“Thank you, thank you,” he said, glaring. Goddamn chicks these days. If he hadn’t needed that door opened he’d have opened it for her.

When he sidled up to the counter, a young smiling man smiled at him.

“Hello, Mr. Moreno! Welcome back. What can I help you with today?”

“Roger doger. An appointment with Jeff. Yesirree. I’m here to see Jeff today. He’s my man today to see."

“Absolutely, sir.” The young man left the counter and walked around towards the back. He came back with a blonde woman in a pantsuit, her hair pinned up. She looked pinched. Frank frowned.

“Mr. Moreno, Jeff went home with a family emergency.”

“What! No, no, gotta see Jeff. Today. He handles all the Moreno family personal affairs.”

“Well, Therese here has the same sort of training and would love to help you out today,” he said.

“Hello, sir,” Therese said, raising her voice higher, mouthing slowly. “Why don’t you follow me back to the corner over here and we’ll get you situated?”
Frank’s gummy jaw met his other jaw, puffed out his cheeks. Fine, fine. Absolutely foolish, he thought. Like she knew a damn thing about this entire situation.

Soon he was seated in a squishy chair while Therese looked across the desk at him, her glasses resting on her nose. She tapped the keyboard. He squinted at her.

“Well, Mr. Moreno,” she began. “It looks here like you’re here to discuss land rights? You’re worried about the revision of the old homesteading act?”

“They took it! They think they can just take it!” He tried to keep his hands together, tried not to shake too much. The other thing that happened when you got older is when you got mad people bowed around you, scooting themselves out of the way, sometimes even closing off when it got intense. They’d listen to his sons. Like they had a goddamn good thing to say about anything.

He tried again.

“Can’t be right, can it? Bought that land with my own veteran pay. Fought for this goddamn country, deserved it, is what they said long time ago. Should be mine fair and square.”

Therese looked uncomfortable. She typed more furiously, looking over her eyeglasses at him.

“Yes, yes,” she said. “Absolutely. I think maybe we can do something for you.”

“Land’s paid off, anyway. And I ain’t selling.”

“Of course not, of course. Let’s see.” Her fingers clicked away. Frank noticed a large glass bird on her desk, blue wings, a paperweight. He sighed loudly and shifted his
weight. The chair creaked. On the side of her desk was a plate of cookies. He helped himself. Crumbs fell to the floor. She didn’t look up.

“The issue I’m seeing here is that the land isn’t in your name. Correct? It looks like it’s in… Regis? Regis Moreno?”

“That’s my wife.”

“Oh, okay, sir. But—well, the issue is that she’s not the veteran. The principle owner, yes, but the land should’ve been in your name if you were truly getting veteran benefits for homesteading rights.” She pulled out a binder and set it on her desk. She shifted her body towards him, encouraging him to do the same. He didn’t. “See here, subsection six. In the situation of veteran benefits assisting family living—“

“I know all those goddamn rules. I’ve done my research. You got to understand this, little lady, my wife made me do that. She made me! Thought I was going to leave her once we got up here. Like I’d leave her in a goddamn cabin in the woods. Like I’d leave a woman alone.”

“Sir, yes, I don’t mean to make you upset.” Therese looked up over the cubicle, trying to make eye contact with someone from the desk. She couldn’t, he realized, and then they both realized she was in this alone.

“I didn’t give my sweat and blood to let anybody take that land away from me, you hear? My wife doesn’t even care. You need to see her, to talk to her? I’ll drag her in here by her hair if that’s what it takes. She’s going to give up that title right now, right here, right to me. See? I’ll get her in here.” He shoved his chair back, trying to stand.
“Mr. Moreno.” Therese stood up. She stood over him. “That will not be necessary. I didn’t mean to make you upset. Perhaps…perhaps we can work something out. Can you, um, can you calm down? Sit down.” She looked over her cubicle again, nervous again, her confidence fading. “Please sit down,” she whispered.

He did, still protesting. His jaws clinked each other gently.

She lowered her voice.

“Moreno, Moreno—is that, um, well is that a…Native American name?”

“Huh?” His jaw chomped down, hard. “What’s that ya said?”

“Pueblo?” she asked louder. She looked over the computer at him. “Hopi?”

“No, no!” His face suddenly got hot. “What kind of a thing are you suggesting, little lady? Out of line, out of line.” He clapped his hands together, then tapped them back down on his lap.

“Are you sure?” She made long eye contact with him. They stared at each other. She waited. “Are you sure you’re not Native American? You look, I mean, Moreno is…”

Then she trailed off. “Yes, I’m sure there’s ancestral ties that we could just wrangle, here.” She went back to her screen.

He leaned back in his chair. He unbuttoned the top three buttons on his shirt. Cookie crumbs scattered into his lap. How dare they, how dare she. No one had even suggested. No one had suggested in years. Not since he was a boy. Not since he tried to go to those teachers, those faces looking down at them with their crystal blue icy eyes, telling him it was his fault the fight started just the way it was his fault his father left.
His chest heaved.

“Sir?” She picked up the phone. “Sir, are you okay? Do I need to call someone?”

He sat back up.

“I’m going to go, now,” he growled.

“Do you… do you want me to? Should I, um, go ahead?” She lowered her voice again and put her face down close to the table. “No one has to know.”

He stood up, his legs shaking at first. He clenched his fists so they wouldn’t shake, too. Then he bent towards her desk, putting his face very close to hers. She smelled like breath mints, like lavender, like dish detergent.

He wanted to say something. But all he could see when he stared at Therese was his mother’s eyes. The only time he went crying to her, her face not moving, only heavy and silent. She said nothing, did nothing. She’d moved them off the reservation once the suicides started and then Frank started dying the tips of his hair, trying to be blonder, normal. He breathed harder at the thought of her voice, saying “You look like your father,” and then choking up. Her face when he finally asked her for braces. After the draft and Vietnam he’d all but run to Alaska, looking to start over in a place no one knew his mother’s last name. He hadn’t seen her since. Never went back. He’d met Regis and run away, and no one knew him. No one knew him here. He opened his mouth like a drowning fish in air, flopping it, wagging his tongue against his empty jaws, his mouth filling with air and puffing out, and then he closed it.
“Just sign this,” Therese whispered. A paper on her desk. A pen. Frank took it from her. He couldn’t read the paper, didn’t want to. He signed—a scribble. He threw the pen down. She winked at him proudly and he wanted to strangle her. He imagined his hands around her neck. He knew he was too weak for that anymore.

Instead, he grabbed another cookie. He turned. He left the bank.

“You think you’ve got it all figured out, huh?” he barked at a young boy opening the door for him. “Just wait,” he yelled to anybody listening. “All of you young smilers! Young smilers, just wait.” People stared. A few smiled, winked, exchanged glances. Old men, they said under their breath, he could hear them breathing, whispering, lying to each other.

Lou was reading the paper when he climbed back into the truck.

“Get it taken care of then, Pop?”

“For god’s sakes take me home.”

“Trouble with Jeff?”

“No, no. No trouble. No Jeff!” He was still shaking but Lou didn’t notice. He put the truck in reverse and pulled them out of the spot, back onto the road.

“Who was there, then?”

“A new one. A woman. She—she was new. Didn’t know a goddamn thing about us. About me.”

“She helped you out, though? I mean, we’re not losing the land anymore?”
“Keeping the land. It’s, well, it’s all in good hands. Good hands is the land. She just didn’t know who we are, is all.” He breathed out hard and buckled himself in. He rolled up the window.

Lou didn’t help him into the house when they pulled up, just said goodbye and backed back out of the driveway. Regis was gone for the afternoon, off at some big shot meeting with the hospital board. She exhausted him sometimes. Frank pulled the front door shut and locked the door with a click. He walked to the front porch and locked that door. He pulled all the shutters. The dark of his own living room enveloped him.

He collapsed onto the easy chair, spinning around and around like he used to do as a boy. When all the world’s colors would spin around him. When he’d try to move so fast he’d get dizzy. No one knew. He sat like that in the dark, shivering.