

Ceilings of Copper: Essays

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

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

Katherine Saunders

May 2015

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This thesis titled
Ceilings of Copper: Essays

by
KATHERINE SAUNDERS

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

Dinty W. Moore
Professor of English

Robert Frank
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

ABSTRACT

SAUNDERS, KATHERINE, M.A., May 2015, English

Ceilings of Copper: Essays

Director of Thesis: Dinty W. Moore

Ceilings of Copper is a collection of six personal essays that were written and revised during Kat Saunders' time at Ohio University. The collection traces Saunders' life in Ohio. These essays explore personal and familial relationships, loss, displacement, and bereavement. Various places in Ohio—such as a college town, a Northeastern Ohio suburb, a Columbus gas station, and a Dayton neighborhood—serve as the backdrop for the pieces in this collection. The series of essays is preceded by “Interrogating the Essay,” a critical introduction in which Saunders examines several key craft discussions about creative nonfiction, including the technique of posing questions implicitly and explicitly throughout an essay, honesty's role in the personal essay, and how writers incorporate research in their personal essays. Saunders provides close readings of writers such as Vivian Gornick, Phillip Lopate, Debra Marquart, Leslie Jamison, and Rebecca Solnit, and situates her own essays within their ongoing conversations about craft.

DEDICATION

For Madeline—I give to you

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dinty W. Moore, for his support, encouragement, and feedback. I'd also like to thank Eric LeMay, who served as one of my committee members, but has mentored me since I took my very first writing workshop in winter 2011. Thank you, Joan Connor, for helping see myself as a short story writer, and for also being a part of my thesis committee. I want to thank Ohio University, the English Department, and all of the professors I've had in both literature and creative writing classes since I first came to OU in 2009 as a college freshman. I'd like to thank my parents for their tireless support. Thanks also to my workshop peers who read the earliest versions of the essays that would make up this collection, specifically Sarah Minor, who is an excellent workshop companion, neighbor, and friend. Thanks also to Emily Sferra, Gary Thomas Smith, and Claire Eder for your friendship and for reminding me to stay focused on my writing.

Last, thank you to the larger community of Athens, Ohio—home for the past six years. I will miss your beauty and your strangeness.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: INTERROGATING THE ESSAY

When I signed up for my first creative nonfiction workshop in winter of my junior year of college, I knew embarrassingly little about the genre. I assumed that I would write about my own life—about trips I have taken, people I have loved, people I have lost, places I have lived, arguments I have had with others and with myself. My first workshop experience and subsequent studies in creative nonfiction did, in some ways, reinforce what I presumed to know about the genre. However, my assumptions were also made more complicated. I soon learned that the best personal essays often tackle all that I listed above, but these pieces also go beyond merely narrating one's own experiences. Essayist Vivian Gornick writes:

Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context of circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say (*The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* 13)

Many of my earliest attempts at the personal essay are what Gornick would describe as situation-focused. In my work, I sometimes told a compelling story in terms of plot, but what I lacked was the insight Gornick identifies: Why did I feel compelled to tell the stories I wrote? Why were they interesting to me, and how could they appeal to readers? How could I push my essays to go beyond the anecdotal? I discovered that reflecting on these questions is an essential part of developing insight not only into one's own life, but also into one's writing. Reflecting on these questions became an integral part of my writing process as I began working on the collection of essays that have made up this thesis manuscript.

Writer Leslie Jamison also describes the process of asking questions of one's self and about one's self, which is a common framing technique for the personal essay. Often, these questions are explicitly asked on the page. Sometimes these questions serve as an occasion for the essay. At other times, an essay might build to posing additional questions. In an interview with *ThinkPiecePublishing.com*, Jamison describes her reasons for writing and how questioning figures into her writing process:

It's rarely that I'm saying I really want to write about [a] chapter from my life.

It's more that there's some kind of question I want to answer, and my experience is one of the materials available to me, which isn't to say that I have a totally clinical relationship to my own life, but I have an access to my own interior experience that I don't have with anyone else's (*Think Piece Publishing*)

Many of my own essays in this manuscript are question-driven, but I believe one specific question unifies this collection of essays. As I selected essays, I searched for common themes and subjects, and what I realized was that in nearly every essay, Ohio functions as a speechless character, serving as the backdrop. In some of the essays I asked, either implicitly or explicitly, what does it mean to grow up in and live in Ohio? In the title essay, I wonder what appeal an Ohio suburb offers that my first home, just outside New Orleans, does not. This question is complicated by the inclusion of a parallel narrative about an unsolved mystery surrounding Circleville, Ohio and the strange events related to a series of ominous, anonymous letters. In later essays, I ask what the experience is of being a young woman living in a college town, first as an undergraduate student ("Bile," "The False Window"), and then at an age where I fear that I have overstayed my welcome in, "Upon the Burning". I explore what is often a complex

relationship to place and to home, and I wonder if Ohio is just as dangerous as New Orleans, which my family left partially because of its high crime rate in the early 1990s. I also examine the implications of being a “townie” in a college town, in your mid-twenties, past the age when most people have graduated and moved on with their lives. Because these and similar threads populate the essays in this manuscript, I realize that in the writing I’ve produced over the past two years, I’ve identified what Gornick calls “an emotional experience that preoccupies the writer” (*The Situation and the Story*, 13). For me, that preoccupation is the state of Ohio. What has emerged is what I hope will become the beginning of a book-length collection of linked essays about an Ohio life—mine.

In returning to Gornick’s ideas about wisdom and insight constituting the “story” or the heartbeat of an essay, I wonder how honesty also figures into the story’s construction. I personally see honesty as an integral part of a story’s success; the writers I most admire are those who take risks and resist the impulse to self-romanticize in essays about their own lives. In Phillip Lopate’s introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, Lopate writes eloquently of honesty’s role in the personal essays, remarking that “the struggle for honesty is central to the ethos of the essay” (xxv). Lopate highlights that readers need to actually see that struggle to be honest on the page. Honesty that comes too easily to the writer can make for a less compelling read than the essays in which the risks a writer takes are evident in their choice to self-disclose. Lopate writes:

So often the “plot” of a personal essay, its drama, its suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty (xxvi)

Here, Lopate describes not only what I admire in many of the writers and essays that I enjoy reading, but also a skill that I hoped to demonstrate in my collection. I think that for many young writers of creative nonfiction, it is easy to be honest about other people—the parents who were emotionally withholding, the romantic partner who refused to commit, etc., but Lopate reminds us that the real challenge of the essay is to reflect that unflinching honesty inward.

In the closing essay of my thesis, “Upon the Burning,” a braided essay about the burning of a beloved bar with a narrative about a dysfunctional romantic relationship, one of the most difficult aspects of revising the essay was striking a balance between being honest about others and being honest about myself. In early drafts of this piece, I was fairly hard on Sam, the ex-significant other in the essay. However, my self-analysis was not as rigorous as it needed to be. I had not yet dropped what Lopate would call my own “psychic defenses,” and I think that until I was willing to do this on the page, the essay was not a success. One of the most difficult parts of revising this essay was spending so much time disclosing ways I felt and acted during what was a very difficult time in my personal life. In particular, I found it difficult to write about the belated Valentine’s Day dinner where I was intoxicated at a fancy restaurant and wound up throwing carrots at my date. Personally, I still find it difficult to think about this night, and it was even more challenging to write about Valentine’s Day, knowing others would read what I had done and perhaps judge me for it. Moreover, writing from the perspective of the narrator of that moment in time was emotionally taxing. However, I knew that if the essay was ever going to be successful, I needed to be totally honest in “Upon the Burning”. This need for honesty wasn’t because I felt the need to write for therapeutic, confessional reasons, but

rather, because without my honesty, the essay would feel hollow, inauthentic, withholding—which Lopate reminds us that readers can always sense.

One author who models the ideal honesty that Lopate describes is Debra Marquart, author of *The Horizontal World: Growing up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere*. I first read this memoir-in-essays as an undergraduate, and Marquart’s writing has remained an influential force in my writing life. On first reading, I was struck by how brutally honest Marquart’s writing style was. In a chapter called “Great Falls,” Marquart recounts her divorce, her affair with her married band mate, and a catastrophic tour with her band. With the band stranded in Great Falls, Marquart’s relationship with her band mate takes a violent turn and she is beaten by her lover. Writing in the third person, Marquart describes herself:

She’s a woman who doesn’t believe the laws of the universe apply to her—not the passage of time, the force of gravity, or the curvature of the earth. Whatever is troubling her cannot be loved away or beaten out or screamed clean (176)

As I read this passage, I was disturbed by Marquart’s insistence that her own decisions had a major impact on the things that happened to her, especially the implication that she was, to an extent, responsible for her beating. Although what Marquart suggests can become slippery in terms of larger conversations about domestic violence and victim blaming, to me, this essay accomplishes what many of the best essays do—“Great Falls” arrives at an ugly moment of self-realization.

When I think about less successful essays by other writers, I think that reluctant honesty, or pieces that don’t build to a meaningful epiphany, can be off-putting qualities. Lopate describes why these essays fail to be memorable:

If the essayist stays at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but it will not awaken the shiver of self-recognition—equivalent to the frisson in horror films when the monster looks at himself in the mirror (xxvi)

The effect of Marquart’s “Great Falls” is similar to this frisson-sensation that Lopate describes. Marquart wins readers by appearing brave for her self-evisceration. And at other points in the essay, when Marquart is critical of other characters including her abusive lover, she has already established her ethos because she has been hardest on herself first. I attempted to model this throughout my collection, and in this latest version of “Upon the Burning,” I believe I have come close to appearing as a monster gazing at her reflection in a mirror.

When I began my graduate degree at Ohio University, I had mostly only written strictly text-based and personal essays. However, over the past two years, I have been exposed to other modes of creative nonfiction including audio essays, video essays, interactive essays, installation essays, journalistic pieces, and more. I appreciated learning more about what might be viewed as less traditional subgenres of creative nonfiction, but in particular, I was inspired by the nonfiction I read by Rebecca Solnit, Leslie Jamison, and Susan Orlean. What impressed me about these writers was that they all managed to write about themselves, but their work was not singularly focused on the self. Instead, in their respective works, each of the writers balanced memoir with both primary and secondary research.

In an interview, Rebecca Solnit speaks about her recent—and one of her personal books—*The Faraway Nearby*. The interviewer asked Solnit how she began to research her book and Solnit replied:

In a sense I'm a kind of *bricoleur*, collecting all the time. You can see [how *The Faraway Nearby*] was a blend of my own stories but also things the apricots prompted me to think about. My exploration of Peter Freuchen's books about the Arctic came from a contemporary book that I was reading for pleasure in Iceland; that opened up this huge realm of the cannibal incident in the Arctic, and all the ways that story had been told and could be told, what you can do with the nebulousness of a story. (*The Daily Beast*)

Solnit describes how a personal memory about apricots inspired her to research seemingly unconnected historical events and cultural ephemera, and the result is a moving book that braids stories of Solnit's personal loss with the research she collected about the Arctic.

Upon reading this interview, I related to Solnit's self-identification as a *bricoleur*. In the first essay of my collection, "Circleville," like Solnit, I braid seemingly disparate narratives—one from my own life and one that was based on what amounted to a year of research. The Circleville writer terrorized an Ohio community, and in particular, the Gillispie family who lived there, in the 1970s and 1980s. At the time I began writing the essay that would eventually become "Circleville," I knew I wanted to interrogate my relationship to Ohio and my childhood interactions with my grandmother, who visited each summer from New Orleans. As I began working on the essay, this triggered a lot of memories about how my grandmother allowed me to watch age-inappropriate television

programs with her. One of the shows I remembered watching with her was *Unsolved Mysteries*, which actually covered the Circleville letters case in the early 1990s. Here, I found an unexpected connection, and suddenly another potential narrative emerged. What had begun as a wholly memoir-driven essay, similar in style to other essays I had written before, became more nuanced. In this finished version of “Circleville,” a narrative about the mystery runs parallel to my original narrative. The effect is that through both my personal stories and my research I can explore and trouble people’s assumptions about Ohio—that is a safe place, a refuge for people who want to lead quiet, normal existences. I believe that the essay is richer not only because of its braided structure, but because one of these braids focuses on something other than my own experiences.

Once I discovered a connection between my narrative about my grandmother and the Circleville case, I knew that I needed to conduct secondary research. This research began with tracking down the original episode of *Unsolved Mysteries* (through somewhat legally questionable methods), but I soon realized that this wouldn’t be sufficient. Not much has actually been written about the case, but I discovered a few message boards online where fans of *Unsolved Mysteries* discussed the case. From there, I discovered links to records and documents related to the case, including information about what became of the person some believe to be the Circleville letter writer. I also had access to alternate theories about the case, some of which were not evident in the *Unsolved Mysteries* episode.

After I had spent time compiling research and deciding what to include in the next drafts of the essay, I realized what an intimidating task was before me. Julija Šukys’s simple, short piece, “On Research: Examining One Point in the Holy Trinity of CNF”

proved to be an indispensable text which guided me through revising “Circleville.” For Šukys, the holy trinity described in the title of her essay is comprised of scene and reflection, with research serving as a bridge between the two. Šukys likens the research process to “digestion,” which was a powerful, helpful metaphor. Šukys writes:

You have to let the facts and history work their way through you . . . The research has to become part of you so that you can put it back out onto the page and into the world in a form that won’t fight the story you’re trying to tell. This, I believe, is the most difficult aspect of writing good CNF: figuring out how to teach the reader; how to give enough background, history, facts, and evidence but without deadening your text. (2)

After reading Šukys’s piece, I realized that the research I was used to completing in the past was mostly for academic papers, and the support I used was by way of close reading, and in turn, quoting the passages I was discussing at length in my papers. While this was effective for that genre of writing, it wouldn’t work in a creative piece. Paraphrasing was out of the question in those situations, but I learned that in creative nonfiction, it is an essential skill as long as the information is accurate and the information that is included is critical in helping answer the question at the heart of the essay. What I learned from thinking about this process of digestion was to trust the authority of my voice. I had spent nearly a year on the research; I needed to recognize that I was qualified to write about Circleville, to establish a link between the personal and the research. That being said, I do think that my research could have gone even further; I think the piece could have been even more effective had I attempted to conduct primary research, such as exploring Circleville or attempting to contact those involved in the case. Although the essay might

have benefited from additional research, I am proud of this finished draft of “Circleville” because the more journalistic sections pushed me beyond my “comfort zone.”

“Circleville” is the essay in this collection that is most indicative of the writing I hope to complete in the immediate future. I want to be clear that I don’t wish to disavow strict memoir, and in fact, I do still write solely personal pieces. I do think that it is important for all writers to learn more about their craft, and one way this can be achieved is by exploring alternate modes of writing beyond what is familiar, or what one feels confident that they can do well. Because I have had the experience of composing essays in styles that are less familiar to me, I believe that that I am now a more mature writer, and I have prepared a more sophisticated collection than I might otherwise have completed.

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CIRCLEVILLE

“If YOU COME TO OHIO YOU EL SICKOS WILL PAY”
-THE CIRCLEVILLE WRITER

Before the letters came, the Gillispies were a normal family. Mary Gillispie was a school bus driver. She was married to a man named Ron and they had children. The Gillispie family lived in Circleville, Ohio, a small town located about an hour south of Columbus. Circleville is well known throughout the state for its annual pumpkin festival, but otherwise it is a sleepy town, one not unlike many of the other small towns in Ohio. There was nothing exceptional about the town or the Gillispie family.

And then, in December of 1976, Mary Gillispie checked her mailbox.

When I was seven years old, my parents decided that we had to leave New Orleans. My father, an accountant, was asked to transfer to an office in Ohio, and my parents seemed relieved to accept the offer. The city had become increasingly dangerous in the 1990s, and terrible things were happening, even in Metairie, the suburb where we lived. A social worker had gone to a dangerous neighborhood in the city to investigate a case; her severed head was recovered, days later. And Antoinette Frank, a police officer who worked as a part-time security guard at a popular Vietnamese restaurant, had executed members of the family who owned the business in their walk-in freezer. Her victims had regarded her as a member of the family. I imagined icicles forming on their eyelashes as their blood ran and then froze.

On the afternoon when the nasty business of the letters first began, Mary Gillispie checked her mail. I am sure there were bills, advertisements, and coupons for combo meals from the local pizza restaurant. But there was also a letter. There was no return address listed, but the envelope was postmarked from Columbus. Mary opened the letter and what she read terrified her. The letter, written in a sinister and blocky scrawl read:

I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE : I'VE BEEN OBSERVING YOUR HOUSE
AND KNOW YOU HAVE CHILDREN : THIS IS NO JOKE

The writer revealed that they knew Mary was having an affair with the Circleville school superintendent and that if she didn't end the relationship, there would be consequences. Although she was unnerved by the tone and content of the letter, Mary decided to keep the incident a secret, waving it away as a prank. I imagine her folding the letter over and over again so it could be small enough to be tucked in the back pocket of her jeans. I think it is likely she tore the letter up and flushed it down the toilet.

Ohio's blandness must have made the state seem like a safe place to raise a child. Before we moved into our house on a cul-de-sac, in a neighborhood of many other cul-de-sacs, I wonder if my mother and father knew that the small town where we'd be living only had an Applebee's and a grocery store that couldn't sell wine on Sunday. Did that matter to them before we moved? They had given up oyster bars and steak restaurants run by the New Orleans mob. My mother had left behind Maison Blanche, the department store where she bought her monogrammed mink coat, where she picked out my crunchy, crinoline-lined Easter and Christmas dresses. We used to meet my grandmother for lunch at the store's bistro, after she had a hair appointment in Maison Blanche's salon. I

remember my grandmother's freshly set hair—how immaculate it seemed—and the smell of her hairspray mingled with notes of garlic rising from my plate of spaghetti and meatballs. I twirled the long noodles around my fork, imitating my mother and grandmother. I invariably spilled red sauce down the front of my dress. There was a full-time pianist whose music filled the department store. The sound of his fingers hitting keys ricocheted off the mall's marble floors. Summit Mall, where my mother shopped after we moved to Ohio, was fifteen minutes away. The food court served greasy pizza and no one played the piano.

“There will be real snow in Ohio,” my parents had said—the only selling point they could think of when I asked what there was in Ohio that we didn't have in New Orleans. The first time I saw snow was the winter after we moved. It took me nearly an hour to dress before I was allowed to go outside to play. I put on layer after layer: shirt, leggings, thick socks, red boots, overall-style snow pants, red parka, ear warmers, a scarf, and gloves. My father slathered Vaseline across my face and I smacked my lips. Outside, I sledded down the hill our house sat upon, my plastic toboggan cutting tracks into the snow. My sled shot down the street, skidding to a halt at the bottom of the cul-de-sac. Later, I poured a juice box over a mound of snow, and I licked it, tasting the earth along with the cold ball I held in my glove. When my mother finally called me back inside, I tracked slush into the kitchen. My cheeks were raw and red.

Enough time passed that maybe Mary Gillispie forgot about the peculiar letter she received. If Mary had forgotten about the writer, he certainly hadn't stopped thinking about her. Eventually, more letters started coming to the house, and they were becoming

harder to ignore, but Mary still tried to. The writer forbade her from telling anyone about the letters or the threats within them.

Exasperated, the letter writer sent a letter to Mary's husband, Ron. The writer ordered Ron to do what his wife could not—to force her to break off her relationship with the school superintendent. If Ron refused to or if he failed, the letter writer would harm the Gillispie family.

I wonder if Mary felt relieved that someone else finally knew about the letters. She denied the affair of course, and there was nothing to be done, nothing to placate the letter writer. How could she stop something that wasn't happening? The Gillispies consulted with another couple, Ron's sister and her husband Paul Freshour, about what to do about the harassment, but otherwise they kept the secret to themselves.

"Ignore them," the Freshours suggested after examining the letters. And so, the Gillispies did what they had been doing—nothing.

I had few remaining tethers to New Orleans after we moved. My family still half-heartedly tried to celebrate Mardi Gras; we would buy a dry and nearly inedible King Cake from the local grocery store on every Friday between the Epiphany and Ash Wednesday. I would stab at my own slice of cake, searching for the plastic baby Jesus buried deep inside. My mother would play Professor Longhair, Dr. John, and Al "Carnival Time" Johnson. The friends I invited over for these Mardi Gras celebrations were confused by the tradition; they choked on the King Cake baby and didn't appreciate that it was good luck.

I kept in touch with the boy who had lived across the street from our home in Metairie. We still played make believe games over the phone, our voices jumping, our bodies immobile. There was little satisfaction in those games, and I missed him fiercely; I longed to tread water in his swimming pool, splashing at him, or to race him from the top of the levee to the edge of the lake. Instead, I twisted the phone cord around my finger until my mother called me for dinner.

The most reliable tie I had to my past life was my grandmother, who still lived in an apartment just outside New Orleans. During the summer, she would arrive in Ohio to escape the humidity and to visit her youngest daughter's family. Her long, stately annual visit seemed to last the entire summer. We shared the bathroom that I normally had to myself, and I rummaged through her toiletries bag, dabbing her skin cream, called Oil of Beauty, on my sunburned, freckled face. I shuddered at the sight of her false teeth soaking in a glass at the edge of the sink. Tubes of nubby red lipstick and gold clip-on earrings littered the bathroom counter. I wore the earrings on my own hole-less ears, sweeping up my hair. I still wasn't allowed to get my ears pierced. I wasn't allowed to wear lipstick either, so while I enjoyed opening a lipstick and turning its dial to expose the entire sheath, I didn't dare smear it across my mouth.

Granny wore long, boldly patterned blouses with gilded buttons. And she wore knee high nylons even in the summer weather. At night, she swept through the house in pastel nightgowns. Sometimes she dabbed on White Shoulders, but not always. At night, as I lay in bed, I could hear her snoring like a grizzly bear in its winter den. I imagined her lips quivering over her gums.

Granny was fond of braunschweiger, which sat in our fridge, emitting a disturbing odor similar to sweaty feet. She requested yellow cake with chocolate icing after dinner. She picked the restaurants where we dined on the weekends, although she often complained about the selection.

During her visits, my parents tried to convince her to consider giving up her condo, to relocate to Ohio or South Carolina, where my uncle's family lived.

"I'm not moving," she would huff, dismissing them. She said she didn't want to leave the city or give up her weekend trips to the casino with her girl friends. She loved the poboy shop around the corner from her apartment building, and most important of all, her independence.

Perhaps because the writer had been unable to get a reaction, or even contact, from the Gillispies, the letters stopped, but only for a short time. Ron and Mary resumed life as normal, socializing and working as if nothing had happened. During this time, Ron theorized about who could be responsible for writing the letters, and although he didn't reveal the person's identity to anyone, those close to him said that he seemed certain he knew who had been harassing his family.

On August 19, 1977, about nine months after Mary received the first letter a phone call came for Ron Gillispie. It was the early evening, and the Gillispies' daughter stated that her father had become very upset when he took the phone call. When he hung up he told her that the phone call had confirmed his suspicions about the writer's identity.

"I'm going to put a stop to this," he had said, grabbing his gun and driving off in his pick-up truck. He did not mention who he was meeting or where.

Several minutes later, a short distance from the Gillispie home, authorities say that Ron lost control of his truck. He was killed in the crash.

It is easy to say that of course Ron shouldn't have met the letter writer. He was surely placing his life in danger. But Ron was a desperate man; he wanted to protect his family from the unseen menace.

An investigation into Ron's death revealed that he had been drunk at the time of the accident. Ron's family reported that he hadn't been drinking before he left the house, and although he had been furious, he had been sober when he left the home to confront the writer. When the police examined Ron's gun, recovered from the wreckage, they realized that a single bullet had been fired.

The death was ruled an accident.

When I was a child, I regarded my grandmother with reverence because she was so old, so demanding, and because my parents deferred to her, stocking the house with boxes of the coconut clusters she liked, and arranging appointments for her to have her hair set at the nearby salon. She had never learned to drive so my mother chauffeured her.

"Why didn't she learn?" I asked my mother once.

"Because she didn't need to. She always had someone to take her to wherever she wanted to go," my mother said

My grandmother's tastes were varied and inconsistent. My parents scrambled to make her feel comfortable. I admired her power; she sailed in for a few weeks out of the year and all of her many requests were fulfilled, though often not to her satisfaction. One night, we drove to one of the few Italian restaurants near our house so my grandmother

could have the spaghetti and meatballs she craved. At the restaurant, when the waiter took our order, my grandmother asked for a ham sandwich on white toast. As I spent more time with Granny, I realized that if you live long enough, people will give you whatever you want.

When my grandmother was in town, we didn't do much. We *visited*, which usually found the two of us passing long afternoons in the living room while my father was at work and my mother ran errands. My grandmother's special requests took up substantial space on her folded paper list.

"Get me a copy of my paper," Granny barked as my mother prepared to leave. Her paper was *The National Enquirer*.

While my mother was gone, the television blared. My parents discouraged me from watching TV, instead stoking my early love of books. There were a few series I liked and was allowed to watch, mostly cartoons on Nickelodeon. Granny enjoyed the TV's noise, leaving it on in the background all day, and I began to enjoy the incessant hum.

"Get your finger out of your nose," Granny growled, her swollen feet propped up on the coffee table where I sat, coloring. I obeyed, withdrawing the offending index finger and wiping it on the hem of my sundress before lifting my crayons again.

"What do you feel like watching?" my grandmother asked, and I'd shrug. I knew that if I said *Rugrats* or *Kenan and Kel*, it wouldn't matter; those weren't actual options. Instead, I would ask Granny what my choices were.

"*Judge Judy* is on at four," Granny said after consulting the newest copy of *TV Guide*. "Or we could watch *Jerry Springer*." My grandmother enjoyed watching petty

squabbles unfold onscreen. I'd pick *Judge Judy* because I liked her prim, pressed robes and the way she would screech, "Do I have stupid written across my forehead?" at a plaintiff dumb enough to try to dupe her. My grandmother had adopted the catchphrase, and I'd heard her use it during arguments with my parents when they suggested she move north. Judge Judy was all-knowing, red-haired, and everyone rose when she entered the courtroom. It seemed fitting that I spend the afternoons with one difficult woman, watching another snap at people onscreen.

After Ron died and the investigation into the car accident and its connection to the mysterious letters stalled, Mary resumed working. She also began openly dating the school superintendent, although she swore that the relationship only began after Ron's death. She still intermittently received some letters, but perhaps because of what had happened to Ron, she kept their contents to herself, did not attempt to contact the letter writer, and she didn't involve the police.

In 1983, the writer tried to get Mary's attention through other means; he began leaving vulgar signs along Mary's school bus route, which Mary's daughter also rode on her way to school. This new form of harassment continued for some time until Mary noticed a lewd sign that threatened Mary's daughter's life. Mary pulled over the bus, got out of the vehicle, and tried to tear the sign down. As she struggled with the sign, Mary discovered a small box propped up behind the signpost, and when she opened the box, she discovered a handgun. The gun was positioned and rigged to go off if someone lifted the lid. Mary realized that she had found a failed booby trap, one designed to kill her.

The police considered this incident an important break in their case. Although the person responsible for making the booby trap had attempted to remove the firearm's serial numbers, the police were able to retrieve the numbers and identify the gun's owner—Paul Freshour, Mary's brother-in-law, one of the only people the Gillispies had told about the letters when they first received them in 1974.

As we sat in front of the television, I'd notice Granny sinking lower into the cushion where she sat, a sign that she was about to nap.

"Granny," I whined, "I'm hungry." I waited for her to stir at the sound of my voice.

"Didn't you have lunch before your mother left?"

"Yes, but I'm starving now."

"You'll ruin your appetite for dinner."

"But that's so far away."

"Well," she sighed, "alright." And she rose from her place on the couch or else from the armchair in front of the window. She didn't even ask what I wanted her to make me. She shuffled into the kitchen and began slicing at a loaf of French bread. I bounded from the living room to watch her as she removed a jar of Hellman's mayonnaise from the refrigerator and spread thick spoonfuls across the slices of baguette. Mayonnaise sandwiches, I called them. This was the only snack I ever recall my grandmother making for me.

"Don't you want a piece of ham on that?" she asked as she handed me the plate.

“No thanks,” I said. We returned to the living room and I bit into my mayonnaise sandwich, savoring every dollop of Hellman’s, crunching loudly on the thick bread. Granny searched for another show for us to watch.

My television education wasn’t limited to *Judge Judy* and *Jerry Springer*. I was introduced to *The Young and the Restless*, *Beyond Belief: Fact or Fiction*, *Diagnosis Murder* and various *Lifetime* original movies. The most light-hearted show we watched together was probably *Murder, She Wrote*, and although the setting of the program was Jessica Fletcher’s quaint hometown in Maine, the subject was still murder. I was unsettled by many of the programs we watched together, particularly those that were based on real events—bad things happening to otherwise ordinary people.

Paul Freshour was arrested and charged with the attempted murder of Mary Gillispie. He denied any involvement in the incident, in Ron’s death, and in writing any of the letters. During the trial, Paul did not take the stand in his own defense, a move that he would later regret. The jury found him guilty and he was sentenced to between seven and twenty-five years in prison. With Paul imprisoned in Lima, Ohio, everyone in Circleville assumed that was the end of the mysterious writer who had tormented the Gillispie family. They were all wrong.

Residents of Circleville began receiving letters, still all postmarked from Columbus. And now, the letter writer sent mail to residents across the whole state. The writer targeted politicians and other public figures, threatening to expose their secrets and indiscretions. Although the postmarks reveal that Paul couldn’t have possibly sent the

letters through the prison's mail system, he was still punished. He was placed in solitary confinement without access to pens or paper. And still, people received the letters.

One letter even came for Paul Freshour. In the letter, the writer gloated about setting up Paul. They wrote:

FRESHOUR : NOW WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO BELIEVE YOU AREN'T
GETTING OUT OF HERE : I TOLD YOU TWO YEARS AGO : WHEN WE
SET EM UP : THEY STAY SET UP : DON'T YOU LISTEN AT ALL : NO
ONE WANTS YOU OUT : NO ONE THE JOKE IS ON YOU : HA : HA : TELL
NO ONE OF THIS LETTER : I SAW THE PAPER : GREAT NEWS : GREAT:
THE SHERIFF LOVED IT : HA : HA: DO YOU BELIEVE IT NOW : DO
YOU:

The letter was written in the Circleville writer's signature, bizarrely punctuated style, the capitalized letters and colons popping from the page. Although the Circleville writer was active, taunting Paul Freshour and other people in the state of Ohio, posting letters from a location Paul Freshour couldn't possibly have visited, no one was interested in reexamining whether Paul's conviction had been wrongful, and he remained in prison for several more years.

Of all the shows my grandmother and I watched, I remain the most haunted by *Unsolved Mysteries*. The re-runs played in the late afternoons, and we'd watch them together. After lunch and our afternoon soap operas were finished, I would uninterestedly dress and undress my Barbie dolls until the familiar theme song came on, a chilling, urgent instrumental that suggested what was in store for the next hour: missing

person reports, tales of unexplainable paranormal activity, and warnings about serial rapist-murderers who got away with their crimes. Sometimes the show would end with an update of a previous story. Perhaps the bones of the beloved missing grandmother were found fifty miles away from her home, a bullet sunk in her skull. The bullet would be traced back to a handyman's firearm, the same handyman who had repaired her leaking faucet a week before her disappearance. Of course. How simple. When the show came on, I would set aside my dolls or my coloring book, eyes locked on the screen, terrified and transfixed by the stories I'd hear.

Robert Stack narrated each story in ominous tones. Every episode opened with a shot of him standing in a deserted alley, at night, hands thrust deep in the pockets of his trench coat. He lacked Rod Serling, from *The Twilight Zone*'s, inviting gaze, his features softened by a black-and-white color scale. Instead, Robert Stack was an intimidating force in Technicolor. He was still alive when I watched the episodes, but he wouldn't for much longer. At the end of each show, as Stack recited the tip hotline's number, I was struck by the impression that he seemed to be warning the audience *not* to call with information that would help solve the mysteries. After all, if every case reached a satisfying conclusion—the kiddie rapist is jailed at last, the alien aircraft's lights are revealed to be those from a military jet—wouldn't that be the end of the show?

I first learned of the Circleville letters from an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*. The episode originally aired in 1994, but I watched a re-run with my grandmother on a summer afternoon. Of those involved in the case, only Paul Freshour appeared on-camera, declaring his innocence and urging the police to look into the case once more, particularly into Ron Gillispie's death.

“Is Circleville near here?” I had asked her, growing uneasy as Robert Stack described the details of the crime. I was too young to fully understand why the Circleville writer had been so terrifying, but I recognized that the writer’s relentless surveillance had ruined the Gillispie family, and had possibly helped frame an innocent man.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Granny said, hardly comforting me. A crime committed nearby was nothing new to me, but what surprised me was that I, perhaps like my parents, thought Ohio was supposed to be safe, a respite from New Orleans’ danger. It was naïve of me to expect that Ohio was actually untouched by violence, but still I wondered—if bad things happened here too, then what was the point in uprooting our lives, and running away? Here, there were cornfields and cow pastures, the rundown rubber factories and steel mills. There was nothing to make the Gillispies’ or anyone else’s suffering worth it. At least in New Orleans, there was excitement and color.

I wondered if my mother was ever angry that my grandmother had been exposing me to such adult television. She knew that we hadn’t been spending the afternoons watching cartoons. Why else would I call for them at night when I couldn’t sleep, too haunted by the mysteries I’d encountered in the afternoons? If it was a source of conflict between my grandmother and my parents, I never knew. I know that I asked for Granny to put on *Unsolved Mysteries*, as attracted to the show as I was terrified of it. She could have said no, that it wasn’t a show for children, but instead she encouraged my desire to watch more, to know more about the dangerous world outside the living room—exactly what my parents had hoped to protect me from.

Still, I remember something my mother said once: “It’s good for children to be a little scared sometimes.” She had to have learned that parenting strategy from someone.

Does that explain why my grandmother allowed me to watch those disturbing shows with her? Does this idea account for why I enjoyed scaring myself so much, even as the downy hair on my arms stood, raised in fine points?

Paul Freshour was eventually paroled, and he spoke out often about the case, maintaining his innocence. His appearance on *Unsolved Mysteries* was his most high-profile interview, but long after the incident, he claimed that there were other suspects involved in the case, and demanded that the Circleville sheriff—who has served as sheriff since the letters were first mailed—reopen the case. Paul remained in Ohio, remarried, and although he claimed that he was working on a blog that would expose the truth about the Circleville case, he died from natural causes before he was able to publish writing about his experiences and what he believed had happened.

One crucial piece of evidence that Paul planned to address was related to the day Mary Gillispie discovered the booby trap intended to kill her. Witnesses, including another bus driver, reported seeing a man in a yellow El Camino parked by where the trap had been set up. When cars drove past, he turned away from the road, seemingly disguising himself. He was described as “a large man with sandy hair,” which didn’t fit Paul Freshour’s description. However, those close to the case claim that one of the other potential suspects in the crimes was a man whose brother owned a yellow El Camino.

Who was the sandy-haired man? Did he have any connection the Circleville letters or to Mary Gillispie’s attempted murder? And why did he target the Gillispie family? Was Ron’s death an accident? Little else has been made public about this man’s

possible link to the case, but some point to this sighting as evidence supporting the theory that Paul Freshour had been framed for the crimes.

Right before the *Unsolved Mysteries* camera crew arrived in Circleville in 1994, letters arrived to those involved in the show's production, warning them to stay away from Ohio and to keep out of the case. The episode went on as planned. After the show aired, the letters stopped altogether. The Circleville writer—whoever he was—could have tired of their game. He could have been scared about the national attention the *Unsolved Mysteries* episode brought to the case, or perhaps he even died. Now, the decades-long ordeal is nothing but a strange, twisted sequence in Circleville and Ohio's history.

At one summer's end, just before Granny was to leave on her flight back South, we had a going-away dinner, which featured many of Granny's favorite foods. For me, it was a celebration, not of her visit, but of her departure. After a summer spent in front of the television, gumming mayonnaise sandwiches, I had tired of her. My mother and father were frustrated; Granny had still refused to consider moving. She hated the assisted living communities she had toured with my mother on rare afternoons when I was allowed to stay home alone. Granny said she was too healthy, too cheap to move into an old folks' home—they were where people went to die. They smelled of piss. She and my parents had fought about it a lot; I had listened to the many loud, but muffled conversations through my bedroom door. I felt I should side with my parents because they were my parents, but I couldn't fault my grandmother for wanting to stay in New Orleans, and if they had made me move, at least they couldn't force her too.

For Granny's going away dinner, my mother slow-cooked green beans and prepared mashed potatoes in the mixer. She bought crisp, oily pieces of fried chicken and yeast rolls from the convenient store in town. Granny and I waited in the car while my mother went inside to collect the chicken.

"You never visit *me*. I always have to visit you," Granny said, bitterly.

"But we do," I said.

"No you don't. You never come back."

Although I stopped watching *Unsolved Mysteries* after my grandmother returned to New Orleans, my uneasiness about Ohio remained, shaped both by loneliness and anxieties about the Circleville case. Although I had been too young to truly understand the terror the writer wreaked, I felt that I had insight about Ohio that my parents didn't. They thought that we were safe, but I knew better: even checking one's mailbox could be perilous.

After Granny left, I found she had left behind one of her red lipsticks and her favorite set of gold clip-on earrings. I wore the earrings until she finally called my mother and asked for her to mail them back. But when I wore the earrings, I felt close to Granny, imagining the two of us, not on the couch in my parents' living room, but in my grandmother's New Orleans apartment. I remembered her old-fashioned style telephone with its round, spinning face. A tray of butter mints always sat out on her glass coffee table. The apartment smelled of pot roast and her perfume. If she were home, she would be there now, perhaps watching the television, doing whatever she pleased.

When I wore Granny's earrings, I closed my eyes and I saw my old life in splinters—my house in Metairie, on a street that wasn't a circle, but a finite line.

AFTER THE HURRICANE

Hurricane Katrina made landfall a week after I started high school. Wearing a pair of olive colored corduroy pants, a new monogrammed backpack, and breasts that had recently emerged, I pushed my way through the overcrowded hallways that smelled of sweat and lunch meat. At the same time, in New Orleans, a city where the dead are buried above the ground, winds exceeding 125 miles surged. The canals were swollen, the levees breached. And the streetcars were empty.

My aunt Gale, my granny, my grandmother's nurse Dora, and Princess (my aunt's shih tzu) managed to escape from the city before the storm hit, arriving at my parents' house in Ohio just as I returned home from tennis practice and my father got home from work. I hadn't seen my grandmother in two years, and I was stunned at how frail she appeared, barely strong enough to propel her walker forward. She had been diagnosed with dementia recently; she sometimes forgot that she had been widowed twenty years before. She would get angry when my mother wouldn't show up to pick her up at the hair salon, even though we had moved to Ohio when I was seven years old. Her phone calls became infrequent, and when she'd mail me a check on Christmas or for my birthday, her handwriting was faint, shaky, as if she barely had the strength to press the pen to the card. I knew about these issues, and yet I still hadn't been prepared to see her in such a state. I was disturbed by her vacant expression when I stooped to kiss her cheek: she didn't recognize me.

Aunt Gale seemed shaken, mentioning that she hoped they wouldn't be staying long as she had brought just one other set of clothes with her. Dora had only packed

hospital scrubs, her uniform when assisting Granny. Princess sat in the foyer, warily eyeing our dog, Albert. Princess had been in an accident and broken her jaw some years before. Her jaw was still crooked. She growled quietly at Albert.

Dora and my mother set up a hospital style cot in the formal living room because my grandmother couldn't climb stairs any longer. The high-backed wing chair that made your back throb if you sat in it for more than a few minutes was pushed against the wall, scratching off paint. And the uninviting sofa, stiffly upholstered in cream and yellow, wasn't the stately centerpiece of the room anymore. It seemed, at last, that a purposeless room had a practical use.

We spent the night in front of the television, watching coverage of the hurricane. We had all underestimated the enormity of the storm, and I realized how narrowly my family had escaped. The adults drank gin and tonics that my father mixed, pouring the gin liberally. From the corner where I was working listlessly on my geometry homework, I paused to wonder if the city where I had been born, where countless great aunts had lived and been buried, would still exist tomorrow.

The next few evenings passed in a similar way, except each night, the news was worse, and more and more gin was consumed. Our phone had been ringing constantly. Some of the calls were my mother's friends. Did we need someone to cook meals, they wanted to know. Was the family all accounted for, in good condition? There were phone calls for Dora and Aunt Gale too, friends checking in to share where they had evacuated, if they had evacuated. Even friends our family had had when we still lived in the city were making contact. The boy who had lived across the street from me sent me an email

to say he was in New Jersey and that he was fine. He was prepared to start attending a public school there if he wouldn't be able to return to the city for a while.

"I don't know whether I'm even going to have a house to go back to," Aunt Gale said, ice clinking in her glass of gin. She said it several times but no one reassured her or even responded at all. All of the news coming out of the city seemed bad and I privately thought that it seemed unlikely that her house had emerged unscathed. Usually we spent the evening watching reruns of *Law and Order* or mysteries on PBS, but now we didn't change the channel from CNN, captivated by the destruction of the city.

During those long nights, as I draped myself across the couch with an open textbook, we heard of those who died and began to decay inside the Superdome; the men and women who drowned in their attics; the prisoners in the parish jails who were abandoned in their cells without water; the centuries-old live oaks in City Park, uprooted along with everything and everyone else that had seemed firmly situated in New Orleans.

I was expected to come home straight after tennis practice each day to help look after my grandmother while Dora and my mother prepared dinner. Aunt Gale vanished to her bedroom to pass the long afternoons with her pillbox and her rosary. Dora was a nurse—not a maid—but I think she was determined to help out because my mother seemed drawn and exhausted from dealing with my aunt all day.

As Dora and my mother worked in the kitchen, talking quietly, Granny dozed in the oversized armchair with Princess at her side. She often held the remnants of a ham sandwich in one hand, which Princess enjoyed wrestling from her grasp. The TV blared, usually the Home Shopping Network or *Judge Judy*. We had finally stopped watching the

news at all hours. Granny devoured tins of Vienna sausages, and she would often extend her fork to the crooked-mouthed dog. I was supposed to stop her when she tried to do this, but instead I simply looked on as Princess begged on her hind legs, and was rewarded.

“Sonofabitch,” Granny would mutter as she napped. I wondered whom she was talking to, but privately agreed with her. I would have greatly preferred to be out with my friends from tennis, like Audrey, who was older and *almost* had her license. Instead, I sat opposite the shrinking, snoring woman. Her set of false teeth rested on a paper napkin beside her, grimacing at me.

“You don’t even need me to watch her. All she does is sleep,” I complained to my mother, who silenced me with one glare. I found the noise of the house unbearable. I had been happy, comfortable with the previous living arrangements, but now that the number of residents had risen from three people to six, it was impossible to be and feel alone. My father might have been an ally; after all, none of the residents were *really* his family, but he worked late and would never dare disagree with my mother—at least not outspokenly.

“Just how do you think they feel?” my mother asked me when I mentioned how unhappy I’d been since being confined to the home. “Your aunt still doesn’t know if she has anything to return to. Would you want to be Dora and living in *this* town?”

I hadn’t given much thought to how Dora felt about being just about the only black person in our small town. She spent her nights here in the basement; she used to go out downtown and see music when she got off work. It must be lonely, stretched out on the uncomfortable sofa bed down there with only the television’s drone for company in the late hours. I often wondered what she did down there, when she could finally escape

us—my grandmother’s demands, my petulance, and my aunt’s emotional clinginess.

Dora was as much a caretaker for Aunt Gale as she was for my grandmother; I had heard my father say as much before. Dora could always be counted on to distract Aunt Gale, to calm her down, to walk the dog, to make her a ham sandwich. But that wasn’t what she was actually paid to do, and I wondered how much she resented the unexpected duties of her job.

“What about Aunt Gale? Why doesn’t she help out at all? Dora’s out there walking Princess right now. Why isn’t she doing it?” I asked my mother, hoping that I spoke loudly enough for my voice to rise to the second floor.

“She’s—she’s going through a *difficult* time right now,” my mother said, then sighed.

“I need to be with people my own age,” I whined.

“And right now, your family needs you at home.”

Dora left once Aunt Gale and my mother decided that Granny needed to move into a nursing home. It was obvious that my grandmother needed more care than Dora or my mother was capable of providing. A nursing home in town, Sterling Oaks, had a vacancy. I assumed that meant the previous resident had died. Aunt Gale and my mother toured the home and deemed it acceptable. It was like every nursing home—large, cheap-looking columns, a circular drive, surly aides, mushy food, and the ubiquitous stench of piss. No one had planned that my grandmother’s evacuation would end in her permanently moving to Ohio, but my mother had been surprised by just how much Granny’s health had deteriorated.

The night before Dora left, Aunt Gale said she didn't know what she would do without her. Dora would not go back to New Orleans, but instead planned to move in with her son and his family, somewhere in Virginia or maybe the Carolinas. Aunt Gale drove Dora to the Indiana state line where Dora's son was waiting. I missed her even though I barely knew the *real* Dora. I didn't know what clothes she wore when she was out of her hospital scrubs, but I knew I would miss her cloud of smoke from the back porch and the pots of collard greens she stirred on the stove. At night, I would eavesdrop on stretches of conversation from the deck, where Aunt Gale and Dora passed the long evenings, a bottle of gin resting between them. My aunt had been widowed several years ago, and Dora was determined to see Aunt Gale in a new relationship.

"You need to get some *sex!*" she said, laughing, as Aunt Gale screeched in shock and amusement. She said she couldn't imagine being with another man, an admission Dora just couldn't understand, shaking her head and laughing throatily.

Before she left us, Dora spoke about her car that was surely rusting somewhere in New Orleans, its seats ruined with mildew. I think there had been a man left behind as well, although she didn't mention him and I don't know whether he called or not, late at night, after Dora had retired to the basement. It seemed doubtful and I wondered if she cared. Dora liked men and had dated a lot of them. Her house, car, and now her job were gone; losing a fling must not have felt like a great loss. Still, I wanted to know who he was, whether he and Dora would find one another again, once the chaos following the storm had dissipated. I don't know whether that happened, as Dora's letters and phone calls, frequent at first, then less so, only mentioned her new, quiet life in the Carolinas before asking how Granny and Aunt Gale were faring.

Not long after my grandmother moved into the nursing home my sort--of cousin Kerry, a cartographer at the Pentagon, was able to ask a favor of someone she worked with, and she viewed aerial photos of my aunt's home. My aunt breathlessly spoke to Kerry on the phone once she had had time to review the findings.

"It's standing?" she asked, pausing for Kerry's response. "It's really alright?" They spoke a bit longer, mostly about Kerry's upcoming wedding, which we all planned to attend, before Aunt Gale hung up the phone.

"I guess I can start thinking about heading back?" she addressed my parents and me now, still stunned by the news that her house appeared to be in good condition.

I felt relieved to hear that she would be leaving soon, already greedily imagining the boy/girl party I would be able to throw, holding court in the basement where just days ago Dora had slept alone. It seemed like at last I'd have my family, my house, and my life outside of the house back. I thought of how quiet the house would be—none of my grandmother's snores, the muffled sound of the television from the basement, my aunt's constant weeping. As much as I was looking forward to having my friends over again, I was mostly excited about the silence, about being able to really be alone again.

Around this time, my mother walked in on me touching myself. She flounced noisily into my room, arms full of laundry. I lay, splayed across the bed, toes curling, my hands thrust down the front of my faded underwear, my pants limp around my ankles. I panted, grinding against the duvet, thinking of the things I would do if I were ever alone with a boy—Audrey's older brother in particular.

“If you’re going to do that, you need to lock your door,” my mother stammered from the doorway. I could detect the mixture of repulsion and surprise in her gaze. I withdrew my hand from my panties, sat up to face her, but said nothing.

My mother placed the pile of crisp folded clothes on my dresser and left quietly, closing the door behind her. I settled back against the bed, but I wasn’t turned on anymore. Before I finally buttoned my corduroys again, I crossly realized what I should have said to her retreating back:

Next time, knock.

The weekend before Aunt Gale returned to New Orleans, we all drove to my sort-of cousin Kerry’s wedding in Pittsburgh. Halfway there, my aunt and my mother fought in the car. It was an inevitable event, taking place in the parking lot of a strip mall where we’d stopped to have lunch at a Houlihan’s. During the past few weeks my mother had endured my aunt’s mood swings and outbursts, mouth set and tense, only saying nothing because my aunt was a refugee. But since Aunt Gale had found out that the house was in good condition, I had noticed my mother’s patience waning. She had also begun to question the amount of gin my aunt was consuming, especially when mixed with her antidepressants and barrage of other prescriptions. I had been happy that finally *someone* was talking about it, but the result was that the house had been fraught with more conflict, more noise, and even more tears than before.

On the way to the wedding, Aunt Gale had tried listening to the Stations of the Cross on tape—without headphones. When my father asked her to turn down the volume, she raged, so offended that she refused to come in and eat with us, sitting in the backseat

of the car, weeping and praying. Inside the restaurant, I ate a French Dip sandwich, gleefully dunking the bread in the au jus, pleased that it was just the three of us at the table, and soon it would permanently be that way again.

Once lunch was finished and we were back in the car, the fighting continued, now extending beyond the Stations of the Cross to encompass six weeks' worth of perceived slights and annoyances.

"You never made me feel welcome in your home!" she yelled. She mentioned that she had just survived a traumatic natural disaster and that she had been made to feel like a nuisance. I shifted guiltily at this indictment, although it didn't seem like a fair claim to make about my parents.

"Enough," my father spat from the front seat, "do you realize how useless this is? You had a place to go during the storm. You have something to return to. You need to be grateful for what you have had and have." He reminded her of those who had left on crowded buses to be dumped in Houston, of those who hadn't been able to leave at all, of those who had lost their homes, their belongings, and the people they loved.

"You need to stop feeling sorry for yourself," my dad said to the silent car. I stared forward. The windshield wipers tapped lethargically, beating against the sullen rain that was falling, the rain that would force the wedding ceremony indoors later that day. I met my father's eyes in the rear view mirror and looked away quickly. I wasn't sure how much or if any of his words had been intended for me, but I chewed my lip, considering how I had rolled my eyes when my mother asked me to sit with Granny in the early evenings. I thought about Dora who had existed miserably in the basement, who had picked up Princess's shit every day but didn't know where her boyfriend had gone.

My aunt stopped crying. I felt like I was going to be ill. Aunt Gale and I had both spent the weeks following Katrina as an excuse to think only of ourselves, moaning about how the storm had inconvenienced us individually. Behind our bedroom doors, we were twins for our self-absorption.

Everyone always said how alike we were. We shared the same wide smiles, round breasts, and rosy skin. We loved literature and were prone to indulgent bouts of sadness. We were selfish and often disguised barbs as jokes. I resented the similarities every time someone pointed them out to me, but trapped in the car, my father's words still ringing in my ears, I couldn't ignore the resemblances any longer. I saw my disgust with her for what it was: disgust with myself as well.

Aunt Gale didn't apologize, not until after the soup course at the wedding reception. When she finally said she was sorry, I said nothing, eyes downcast as my parents forgave and embraced her. The best man stood to speak, and he wished the bride and groom a lifetime of happiness. I was holding a glass of champagne, but I felt I didn't have any right to enjoy it, to raise my glass, to toast, to celebrate.

OREGON DISTRICT

Driving home, I count the things Sam gave me: his cigarette lighter with flaming eyeballs on it, three cigarettes I don't particularly want, and his gray t-shirt—which is soft against my skin, smelling of fried chicken, of sex, his soap. A red-tail hawk appraises the passing cars from the median, head cocked. I hear white noise, the crunch of static. I am caught between radio stations.

I was not supposed to stay Sunday night, but Sam asks me to, which surprises me. We walk down to the Oregon district, where tiny bistros share wall space with porn shops. Fetish mannequins stand in the window, wearing latex corsets and crotchless knickers. They stare vacuously at us. Inside the store, average looking men pay a quarter to jerk off in a private booth. We talk about going inside, but we don't. Instead, we walk back to Sam's place, dodging patches of ice. Outside of the Goodwill we pass, a pile of free books sit in a box. I pick up a handful. They are terrible romance novels. As we walk back to Sam's apartment, I read him passages from *Winter Love*.

We are not tender people, and yet Sam snaps my photo when we are at dinner on Saturday night. I think he does this mostly because I am holding a martini, because the band in the lounge is playing Al Green, and because we turn to one another, and because when we turn to one another, it is convenient, familiar. We've done it so many times before. Tonight, he looks at me intently, and he asks me to pick the wine. When I ask to see the photograph, I think it is unflattering, but he keeps it.

It takes two hours longer than it should have, but once I am in town, we go out. It has taken two years, but finally Sam is buying me dinner. After we eat, we go to the Century Bar. In the elevator on the way down, Sam's neighbor invites himself along. He is drunk enough that he is amusing, but not so drunk that we'll turn down his offer to buy us our drinks. Inside the bar, I try to fish the cherry from my old fashioned. Sam's neighbor manages to insult a handful of patrons within a few minutes of our arrival. As we watch the neighbor make several flustered attempts to apologize, Sam places his hand in my pocket to stroke the fingers that are warming there. When he goes outside to smoke, his neighbor sits down across from me. He keeps calling me Enrique Iglesias because he can't remember my name.

"Look," he tells me, "you've got a good thing going here." He jerks his head towards the door Sam just passed through. "Don't mess it up." I say that I'll try not to.

It always seems that when I drive to see a man I become lost.

THE FALSE WINDOW

The last sound I hear before falling asleep at night is the clatter of innumerable glass bottles being flung into the recycling bin beneath my window. The bar closes at two, but the bartenders and their friends stay for several hours longer, sneaking drinks and throwing darts. Music from the jukebox rises eerily from the floorboards in my apartment. I can make out a familiar refrain for a moment before the song is indistinguishable once more. Muffled chatter and laughter occasionally break out, but the noise does not rouse the grey tabby cat sleeping on the corner of the love seat, her black-tipped tail flicking serenely. She is far too busy dreaming of her next opportunity to claw at the shower curtain when I'm out.

The television hums quietly: a title screen of *The Twilight Zone* and Rod Serling's ominous voice beckoning me to enter a world beyond imagination. I reach to scratch the tabby cat's ear. Outside, I hear hurling in the alley—a girl in a 21st birthday crown is vomiting, blonde curls swept safely out of the way by a considerate friend. I smell cigarettes and hot dogs, the smells of 3 AM.

In the morning, when I take out the two bags of garbage that have accumulated, I will have to remember to dodge puddles of drying vomit, splayed chicken bones, half-eaten slices of pizza, and used condoms.

It is easy to live here. Tony, my landlord never scowls at the cat, despite the clause in my lease declaring: "No Pets." My neighbors, Grace and Mike, are kind, and often invite me over to share a glass of wine and gossip about the people who live in the apartments behind ours. Grace said the man in Apartment 4 started shitting in his bathtub

when his toilet stopped flushing. The mess was only discovered a couple of weeks later, when the landlord stopped by for an unexpected visit.

“Why wouldn’t he think to call Tony?” I asked, disbelievingly. Grace said she doesn’t think he’s “all there” anymore and that he makes his living sweeping cigarette butts from the sidewalks outside the uptown bars or scattering salt in the winter. I said I couldn’t imagine what his place must have smelled like.

“We like you more than the boys who lived here before you moved in. One night, they were fighting so loudly that I called the police, and one of the guys ripped the bathroom door off its hinges. I don’t think he ever came back after that. Look at your bathroom door later. See how it doesn’t quite fit, how the paint doesn’t match? It’s a replacement Tony found at the dump and fixed up because those two guys were trying to kill each other,” Grace said.

I stared at the bathroom door for a few minutes, before I went to bed that night, noticing for the first time how the door seemed slightly too tall for the frame, and just a shade too dark.

My favorite time to shower is Tuesdays, in the early evening, when the jazz band plays live downstairs. They’re nothing special, and they always play the same tunes week after week. But even over the shower’s hiss, I can hear the notes spring clearly. The cat wedges herself between the tub and shower curtain, staring intently at me, pupils flexing and luminous. She stalks off to sulk in the sink once I finally tire of her appraising gaze and flick drops of water at her. I hum along to “Stormy Weather,” though it’s in the

wrong key for my voice. The hot water never lasts long enough, so the shampoo clings stubbornly to my hair when I turn off the water.

I used to worry that the patrons at the late-night restaurant next to my building could spy into my window, as I emerged, naked and red, from the steam-thick bathroom, a towel coiled around my head. And I began dimming the lights, groping blindly at the edges of the kitchen counter to find my way back to my room, where a clean robe hangs. I was at the restaurant one night, a little drunk and very hungry, when I realized that the window above the deep fryer, the one I thought surely exposed me in private moments, was frosted so that the glass was useless. A false window. Back in my apartment, French fries scattered across the kitchen counter, I could see into the apartment above the restaurant, where a girl was sucking a boy's cock. They looked happy. I was relieved to know that although I could see silhouettes of men pissing in the alley, couples too excited by one another's bodies to shut their blinds, or people fist-fighting in line at the restaurant, no one could peer in at me.

BILE

“AAA says there’s at least an hour wait,” my friend Madeline says, sullenly dragging a hand through her hair. It is a muggy July night and we are sitting in the parking lot of a Sunoco gas station in Columbus. It is after midnight. My own hair is lank, grimy, and it still smells faintly of cigarettes, the pine bite of gin—the scent of last night. I pat it self-consciously, but all I accomplish is making it lie flatter still. We have been waiting here for several hours.

Five minutes into our trip back from Columbus to Athens, where we live, Madeline’s huffy Plymouth Horizon had given out. The lights on the dashboard flickered erratically, and Madeline swerved to make the first exit we saw. On the ramp, a few hundred yards away from the Sunoco, the Plymouth shuddered and stalled. We had rolled the car into the Sunoco lot with the help of a man who had been loitering in the gas station parking lot.

We call Madeline’s boyfriend, Graham. “You’re in a bad neighborhood,” he says. The blue sailor dress I’m wearing is rumpled, its once stiff collar, limp. My underarms are ringed with sweat, and they smell like a cup of milk that’s been left out on the kitchen counter for too long. Since we’ve sat here, the inside of the gas station has closed, and now patrons have to speak to the greasy adolescent cashier through a smudged window.

A middle-aged man in a vividly colored suit— neon orange or green—jabs with an index finger at the cigarettes he wants to buy, but the cashier keeps pulling out the wrong brand. Madeline and I watch them quarrel, and Madeline takes notes on the scene in the little red notebook she is never without.

“Graham was being weird on the phone,” Madeline says, glancing up from the notebook.

“Did he sound drunk?” I ask.

“Of course he’s drunk; he’s at a wedding,” Madeline sighs. Graham didn’t invite Madeline to the wedding, and I know she’s mad; she has been grinding her teeth all day. Instead of stabbing at an overcooked steak and staggering towards an open bar, Madeline has spent the day complaining and shopping with me. She mentions several times, hungrily, that he must look so handsome in his suit. Today, she bought extravagant underwear for him to peel off her the next time they are together.

Madeline and I recently became good friends when we both fell in love with two men who shared the same apartment. Madeline and Graham are still together. My boyfriend and I aren’t, but we were last night, on the air mattress in Madeline’s front room. I don’t remember much. Sean kissed me, he undressed me, and I bled all over the air mattress, as if my body was rejecting him, as if when he touched me he created a new wound. When I woke up, he was gone. I was crumpled on the mattress alone, and I didn’t know where he was. He may have been smoking a cigarette outside or feeding the parking meter. He could have even been scoring drugs from a grubby house on the west side of town.

By the time he came back, I was dressed. Madeline made us grilled cheese sandwiches cut into triangles, which we devoured at her vinyl kitchen table. The three of us chewed in silence, pouring more Tabasco on the stale bread with every bite. After we ate, he belched and left town, a pile of crumbs left behind at the place where he sat at the table.

“You’re not supposed to get laid in my apartment before I do,” Madeline said in the car on the way to Columbus. She had only been living in her new place for a couple of weeks.

“Do you think I’m proud of it?” I asked, thinking of the blood-streaked underwear I’d left wadded in the trashcan in Madeline’s bathroom.

Sitting in the Sunoco parking lot, I think about calling Sean because he’s from Columbus too. He and Graham have been friends since high school, but it’s sometimes difficult to see why they’re still friends now. In the fall, Graham will move to Chicago to attend law school. Sean will start a new job and use his salary, rather than his trust fund, to buy cocaine.

“Call him,” Madeline says, “Didn’t he say he was coming back to Columbus when he left? Maybe he can pick us up.” I shrug, choosing instead to watch the woman pumping gas several yards away from Madeline’s car. She’s smoking a cigarette. Two children sit in the backseat of her battered convertible, kicking at one another, their faces streaked with what looks to be a mix of grime and tears.

“Knock that off!” the woman growls, stubbing out her cigarette, wearily resting one hand on her hip as she holds the gas pump with her other. I wonder why these kids are still out, still wide awake after midnight. They can’t be more than five or six years old. They’re still squabbling. One pinches the other. “Goddamn it!” The woman stops fueling the car and leans menacingly over the backseat. “You’re not getting any candy when we get home. And you’re going straight up to bed,” she says.

“Christ, they should be in bed *now*, ” Madeline says, rubbing her eyes. Wails rise from the backseat of the convertible, but they are lost in a roar as the woman restarts her car, lost as the convertible squeals out of the parking lot.

We wait for the tow truck. An elderly man buys gas and then offers to give us a jump, but it doesn’t take. He is hard of hearing and he keeps screaming how sorry he is. He’s not sorry enough to stay with us. Madeline and I watch as a woman wearing only a t- shirt and a pair of panties walks up to the glass window of the gas station store. I’m not sure what she buys, but she saunters away, her legs swinging loosely. She’s laughing, probably at all of us. I text Sean: “Stranded at a gas station in your town. There is a pants-less woman and no one seems to think this is strange.” I don’t ask him for help. I know he’ll be too fucked up to pick us up, even if he answers his phone, even if he decides that he wants to help us.

When the AAA man finally shows up, it’s past 1 AM. He is friendly, apologetic, and he chuckles softly about the “colorful clientele” milling around the parking lot. Madeline and I climb into the cab; it’s probably too small to accommodate three people, but we crush against one another, Madeline seated in the middle. The tow truck driver makes small talk that I mostly ignore, stifling yawns, staring out the window at the dark pastures we pass, the scenery blurring and slipping. Madeline laughs at something the tow truck driver says. I press my cheek against the cool glass.

Once we’re back at Madeline’s apartment, we fling off our shoes. We speak of showering, but open beers instead, draping ourselves across her three-legged sofa. Madeline calls Graham to tell him that we made it back, but he doesn’t answer. He is either dancing or sleeping. She acts as though she isn’t upset, but she leaves most of her

beer unfinished and gets up to wash her face. I think of making a joke as she pads across the room: *Isn't it funny? The only man you can count on is a tow truck driver.* But I can't bring myself to speak the words because I know that if I do, my voice will catch, my face will fall.

A few months after the night at the Sunoco station, I begin my sophomore year of college. Madeline should have been living in the dorms as well, but she finds a loophole, something she was always good at doing. "I'm an orphan and an independent," she tells the people working at the housing department. "I don't have a home address somewhere else, so why can't I make my permanent home here?" They can't argue with her. At nineteen years old, Madeline doesn't have a legal guardian any longer, and her mother's house in Toledo is empty and for sale. She quickly settles into her shotgun style apartment, paying her rent with government money and wages from the hot dog restaurant next door, where she works late nights.

On Sunday nights, I go over to Madeline's apartment, and often, she makes me dinner. In the dorms, I subsist on microwavable cups of macaroni and cheese, so I'm grateful to eat something home-cooked. I don't know how to cook yet myself, but Madeline can prepare complicated dishes. She had to learn how to cook for herself when her mother got sick. Tonight, Madeline makes aloo gobi, curried potatoes and cauliflower. Her apartment always smells of spices—tumeric, cumin, star anise, whole peppercorns. She hasn't lived here long, but already her scent is embedded in the apartment's walls. In five years, when she doesn't live here anymore, I wonder if the apartment will still smell like her.

I sit at Madeline's antique yellow dining room set, watching her peel potatoes, their skins unfurling in tight coils. We both sip screwdrivers, the taste of vodka in them so strong that I wrinkle my nose. My cup leaves a ring on the table's surface, and my throat burns with each acidic mouthful. Orange pulp lingers on my tongue, leaves a film across my gums.

"I keep waiting for Graham to tell me when I can visit him," Madeline says, neatly cleaving a head of cauliflower. "It's his birthday soon." Madeline has saved enough money for a bus ticket, but Graham hasn't told her which weekend she can come to stay with him. She has already prepared his gift—a wedge of Gouda cheese, Graham's favorite, and a homemade CD of all of the soul songs they used to make love to. She minces ginger and garlic, adding them to the pan. "I have the outfits planned." I ask to see the outfits because I'm curious, and because I think that if we can talk about clothes rather than the man she hopes to wear them for, she might be distracted, she might stop looking as if she is about to cry into the curry simmering on the stove's hot lip.

Madeline fixes me a plate of food—a scoop of rice, a spoonful of curry, a dollop of cool yogurt. She rummages through her closet as I sit eating on the sofa in the living room. She produces black nylon slips with lace crisscrossing their bodices, their scalloped hemlines. She mentions that she's thinking of wearing one as a dress on the Megabus.

"Do you think that's a good idea? Wearing lingerie on a bus?" I ask. "There are a lot of crazy people on those buses." I think of a boy from my hometown. He once rode a Greyhound and was mugged at knifepoint by another passenger when the bus idled at a

rest stop. Madeline rolls her eyes at me. She has arranged the outfits carefully, as if she is ready to leave at any moment should the phone call come.

Madeline models a mustard yellow pencil skirt, and then one in deep evergreen. Both are wool, a sign of the changing weather. And there are princess style coats with collars and cuffs trimmed in blonde mink. Madeline sweeps one of the coats in her arms; it is faintly moth-eaten, a button is missing, a seam has burst. She searches for a sewing kit and then returns to the living room, seated on the floor with her legs crossed, threading a needle.

I don't know what to wear when I see Sean again. We broke up again—finally—at the end of the summer, after I met him at a hotel near my parents' house, after he handed me a warm Rolling Rock and patted the empty bed beside him, after he cradled me in his arms and promised that he would treat me better and call me every night, after he fucked me and I wept in his open mouth as he kissed me. After all that, I drove home in the dark because I still had a curfew. After all that, nothing was different between us. He didn't treat me better, and he didn't call me every night. But he still shows up in Athens. The last time I saw him was a couple of weeks ago when he was here for Homecoming. This time, he didn't try to sleep with me. I'm not sure what's worse—his feigning interest in me so I'll fuck him, or his utter indifference. That weekend, he told Madeline that he thought my hair was too red. Since then, his cat has died, and I'm not sorry about it. I realize that when I see him again, it won't matter what I decide to wear because he won't be paying attention.

"When Graham left for law school, I vomited bile," Madeline says from the floor where she is sprawled. Her voice is soft and unsteady. "I haven't done something like

that since the night my mother died.” I refill our glasses with vodka, ignoring the orange juice, as she tells me about how her uncle Joe had come home from the hospital with news that her mother had finally succumbed to the cancer she’d fought, defeated, and fought again. Madeline describes how she sprinted to the bathroom, how her hands gripped the ivory toilet bowl, how her body shuddered and heaved, emptying itself. I sit quietly, turning my glass in my hand. I’ve heard the story before, but never like this, not in such detail. I know the role I need to play. I must reassure Madeline that the trip to Chicago will happen, that those outfits will be worn. I must make excuses for why Graham hasn’t returned her calls, and I’m prepared. I can make the same ones that I made for Sean when he wasn’t calling me.

Madeline weeps into the folds of the fur coat she’s holding. A musky scent rises from the mink as it dampens. Madeline is a beautiful girl and a spectacularly ugly crier. She sobs with her whole body. She doesn’t beat the floor with her fists like a tantruming child. She doesn’t pound her chest or wail. She is quiet, her shoulder blades flexing, neck veins exposed and taut. I want to join Madeline on the floor, now, but I can’t bring myself to do it. I think that as long as I remain sitting upright on this sofa, promising her that Graham will call, then I can pretend that one of us is well enough to take care of the other. I can pretend that the calls that never came for me will come for her.

And I, too, want to bury my face in the glorious furs spilling across the hardwood floor. I cannot weep as Madeline does, so openly and unselfconsciously. When my grandmother died last summer, I waited for hours until the house was shuttered and asleep, and then I crawled, wearing only a nightgown, onto the driveway to cry so no one inside could hear me. I long to cry as Madeline does; I have never vomited bile.

Four years later, Madeline and I are in the same city again. She has recently moved out of Athens, but I've stayed behind to attend graduate school. Madeline visits often, and when she's in town, we go to bars. We twirl our straws and twist lime garnishes into our cocktails. Sometimes men approach us. They talk to us; they ask what we're studying in school, what we're drinking. They ask us who our people are.

"I don't have any," Madeline always says.

"Huh?" The would-be suitor asks.

"I'm an orphan," Madeline says, "a triple orphan."

"How can someone be a triple orphan?" the man asks, reeling.

Like this: Madeline's father, a boxer, drops dead from a heart attack right around his thirtieth birthday. Madeline's mother dies from cancer when Madeline is a teenager. After that, Madeline's uncle Joe becomes her guardian. He is a kind man. I only meet him once, but he always asks Madeline about me after that day. The summer after Madeline moves out of town, the summer I turn twenty-three, Joe is killed in a motorcycle accident.

When Madeline's mother died, Madeline vomited. When Madeline's uncle died, I vomited. I was sickened that someone so young could lose so much. When I hear Madeline explain her triple orphanage, I appraise her face—her almond shaped eyes, her high cheekbones, her curled lips— and I wonder how she has been able to withstand these losses. I marvel at her because I have people. My parents are alive, and the only deaths I remember grieving are those of my eighty-five year-old granny and of my childhood dog.

Madeline and I attend our friend Jenny's wedding a year after Joe dies. We are both dateless, drinking too wine much from the open bar, and we feel uncomfortable at our table, which is filled with people we don't know very well. After a dinner of shrimp alfredo and chicken curry, we stand outside the venue to stretch our legs. Some of the groomsmen are smoking cigars, and many of their faces are red with wine already. The maid-of-honor comes outside to announce that Jenny is about to dance with her father. People toss away their cigarettes and shuffle inside to watch Jenny's father guide her across the dance floor. I turn to Madeline and ask her if she wants to go back inside.

"We're going to miss it," I say.

"That's okay," Madeline says. "It's hard for me to watch the father-daughter dance." One of Madeline's most prized possessions is a photograph of Joe and her mother at Madeline's parents' wedding. It is a candid snapshot. Madeline's mother is telling Joe something; her brows are furrowed just as Madeline's are when she's in the middle of a story. Joe smiles widely at Madeline's mother's side. I know why Madeline doesn't want to go inside the reception. Joe will not be there to beam like this on her wedding day as he escorts her down the aisle, or as music swells and he holds her in his arms. Madeline and I stand in the fading daylight, facing away from the room where Jenny dances with her father. We wait until the music fades. People inside clap and cheer, and then we go back inside.

Later that night, Madeline and I dance together.

UPON THE BURNING

*“When by the ruins oft I past
My sorrowing eyes aside `did cast
And here and there the places spy
Where oft I sate and long did lie.
Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,
There lay that store I counted best.
My pleasant things in ashes lie
And them behold no more shall I”*

-Anne Bradstreet, “Verses Upon the Burning
of Our House, July 10, 1666”

During the coldest winter I can remember, I started dating a man because I was lonely. In Athens where I live, snow is usually scarce, and for an Ohio town, our winters are temperate, but not this year. My landlord paid some strangers to salt the front steps of the house I rent. I came home from work to a clear driveway, but the brick-paved street I live on was choked with unplowed snow. The snow rose higher each day. It never turned black, was never the slush I so hated for its filthiness. This snow never seemed to partially melt.

Trellises of ice coated my apartment’s tall, wide windows. I left my duplex only when I had to venture out, my hands thrust deep in the pockets of my fox fur coat, bracing myself for the wind’s coarse, cold tongue on my cheeks. At night, I wore the thickest, ugliest socks I own and tomato-sauce stained fleece pajamas. During the weekends, I rarely changed out of this grubby uniform. I drank bottles of wine and

bourbon alone. I realized, on Sunday afternoons, that the weekend had passed and the only conversation I had had were exchanged *meows* with my cat.

“I’m snowed in,” my friends said when someone suggested that we meet for dinner or drinks uptown. Or else, it would be too cold. Although we all wanted to see one another outside of the basement office we shared, the weather conditions seldom allowed it, and we passed our weekends in isolation.

Although I have never cared much for winter, being snowed in somewhere always struck me as a dreamy experience. I imagined sitting before my windows, wrapped in wool blankets, gazing at the still, glacial world outside. But then, it happened to me. For weeks, I padded across the cold wooden floors in my apartment, only to fall asleep in the middle of my oversized bed alone, and I realized that winter was inside my home.

The first time I had a drink at a bar was the night I broke up with my high school boyfriend, an older man who was twenty-seven. I was nineteen-years-old, my parents hated him, and I had pretended that one day we would eventually marry. I had broken up with him over the phone when I discovered he slept with a girl I had graduated with, a girl named Angel. Because it was so early on a Saturday morning, I hadn’t wanted to wake the sleeping girls in my hallway, so I threw a red robe over my naked body and ran down the stairs of my dorm. I stood, screaming at him through my cell phone, on the football field adjacent to the dorm where I lived. I noticed how the dewy grass soaked my feet and realized that I was barefooted. A college tour of high school students with their parents walked past, gawking at me. I thought about screaming to the high school

students that if they planned to come to college in a long-distance relationship or wearing a promise ring, then this was what they had to look forward to.

When my friend Madeline heard the news, she had arrived at my dorm room with pints of ice cream and *Kill Bill*, parts one and two.

“I need a drink,” I told her.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Madeline said before consulting some of our friends, a group of senior boys who shared the same apartment uptown. “What do you think about the Union? Sean said he can meet us in an hour.”

I shrugged. I didn’t know anything about the bars in town. On weekends, I usually crowded onto half-rotten front porches, cutting in the line for the keg, and then belching on foaming beer. I was always bracing for what seemed like the porch’s inevitable collapse.

“Get dressed,” Madeline said, eyeing my robe and disheveled hair. I was surprised by how easy the task was. I thought that losing your first love was supposed to cripple you, and yet, I easily dabbed on glittering eye shadow and molded my breasts into the cups of a push-up bra.

I was entirely over-dressed for the bar, which was empty at four o’clock when we met our friend Sean. The Union was dim, smelling faintly of flat beer and piss. Soggy newspapers and cigarette butts coated the floor. Still, there were high ceilings, which I later learned were made from copper, a feature of the original building, which dated back to the early twentieth century.

I looked warily at the bartender, who stood polishing pint glasses.

“Don’t worry,” Sean said. “They’re not going to card you. They don’t care as long as you tip and don’t make trouble.” He got up from the booth we shared to order a pitcher of Pabst Blue Ribbon. Just as he had promised, he returned with three glasses and a pitcher of beer. He poured the beer evenly as I told him my sad story.

“My dad cheated on my mom,” Sean said.

“So did mine,” Madeline said, nodding.

We raised our glasses: to men doing terrible things and to our surviving it. We were red-eyed, teary as we sipped our beers, quiet as we stared into the depths of our glasses. I wiped the foam away from the corners of my mouth.

After college, I stayed in Athens to complete a Masters degree. I moved from my apartment above an uptown bar to a large, drafty house on a quiet, brick-speckled street. I thought that by moving I could cultivate a new identity, that I could become someone responsible; someone who didn’t sleep until noon, or with men they had only known for a few hours; someone who didn’t stay out until the birds started singing in the morning. I wanted to rise early and live well. I thought that if I played at being an adult, I could make myself become one.

I also thought I’d meet another equally adult person, maybe another writer, but at the very least, someone nice to share meals with and to sleep beside. After a few months, I realized that wasn’t going to happen. Most of the men in the English department were in relationships, weren’t attracted to women, or weren’t attracted to me, and I was tired of being alone.

Last winter, the coldest winter I can remember, I decided to call a man who I knew was bad for me, just so my bed could be warm again. His name was Sam, and I had known him since we were both students at Ohio University. During my junior year, we had slept together many times, but I didn't particularly like him.

The first night we kissed was after a night at The Union. We had spun on stools at the long bar, looking at ourselves in the mirror mounted above shelves of liquor. I had wanted to sleep with Sam for a while because he wore suits to the bar, because he played saxophone in a local band that was popular at the time, and because, like me, he enjoyed classic movies starring Bogart and Bacall. When he found out that my nickname was short for Katherine, he called me Hepburn.

I liked the way he touched my legs when he was sitting near me. It made me feel as though he was listening earnestly to what I was saying, even if he disagreed, even if he wasn't really listening at all. Although he made the effort of appearing interested in me, he was often rude to other people I was with, especially my male friends. He enjoyed picking a fight with them. Maybe he thought they were his rivals for my attention, for my bed.

When Sam would insult my friends, I would frown and move his hand from my legs. As much as his personality repelled me, I couldn't deny that I was physically attracted to him. He looked a lot like my previous boyfriend—he was five foot four, my height, probably only a few pounds heavier than I am. I wonder if he lied about his height and weight on his driver's license just like my previous boyfriend had. Like my last boyfriend, his hair grew in wild curls.

Before I kissed Sam for the first time, I drank seven shots of Jameson—perhaps to work up the nerve to kiss someone I had realized I couldn't stand. I threw up in the bathroom, but I went home with him anyway at last call. He kissed me on the love seat in my old apartment, and I don't know if he detected traces of vomit on my lips. I never asked how I tasted, and I never confessed the secret. Knowing what I know of him now, I think he may have gotten the first kiss he deserved from me.

After the night we finally kissed, we went home together regularly on weekend nights. We would put on an old movie—*To Have and Have Not* or maybe something by Godard—and then I would feel his hands on my thighs. We never spoke much; it was better that way. If we were at my place, sometimes we fished roaches from the staircase outside of my apartment. Employees at the restaurant across the street often smoked weed in my hallway when they were on their breaks and they left the remnants of their joints scattered. Sam and I would sit on the stairs by my door, spilling beer, lighting the stale roaches. Our saliva mixed with an unknown amount of strangers' spit.

I always felt surprised that I could wake up beside him and feel nothing.

When I decided to host a Christmas party for my friends in graduate school, I realized glumly that many of them were in relationships and planned to bring their partners to the gathering. I was tired of making the same self-deprecating joke every time someone hosted a party: *Sure, I'll bring a significant other. Are you allergic to cats?*

Although Sam had moved out of Athens nearly two years before, he often asked me if he could visit. I didn't know why. Surely there were women he could sleep with in Dayton, where he had moved after he graduated. Because I hadn't met anyone else, I decided to invite him to the party. I knew that if he came, we would get drunk, we would

sleep together, and in the morning we would drink Bloody Marys before he drove back to Dayton. While it was hardly romantic, at least I knew what to expect, and in a way, the lack of messiness, the lack of feelings seemed like a relief.

I was slightly surprised when Sam agreed to come to the party. He would have to meet my friends, something he had mostly avoided when we slept together in the past. On the night of the party, he showed up at my apartment on time. He was wearing a tie and brought a nice bottle of wine. He followed me into my bedroom where I helped him unpack his things, and he kissed me, pushing me against my dresser.

“There’s nothing romantic going on between us,” I whispered to my friends later on in the night, when Sam left the room to use the bathroom. But somehow I was less sure of that than I used to be. Why, after all, had we stayed in contact since he left town, when it seemed as if we had barely spoken on the nights we had spent together. Why did he want to come here, to see me? And I realized that maybe my own reasons for wanting to come were more complicated than I had initially thought.

Early in the night, I fell asleep in bed with a stomach full of mulled wine and very little food. Sam tucked me in and the party continued without me. In my kitchen, he fought with several of my guests about William Faulkner, and when the argument escalated, the party broke up somewhat awkwardly.

When my friends told me about the fight the next day, I shrugged my shoulders.

“You can do better,” they said.

Can I? I wondered.

Both before and after I turned twenty-one, I spent several nights of the week at the Union. The gin and tonics were cheap and the bartenders were friendly. The Union was one of the few bars in town where it was a guarantee to hear the Notorious B.I.G. and Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds on the jukebox in the same evening. I was comfortable going to the bar alone because I always saw someone I knew. Unlike many of the bars in this college town, the Union didn't attract an obnoxious clientele. Even the underage people who drank there were mostly respectful.

I enjoyed watching people bent over the pool table, blue chalk crushed at the ends of their pool cues. Some of my friends liked to order drinks and stand in the back of the bar, where an old pinball machine stood. They emptied their pocket change in the machine. On weekday nights, when the bar was mostly empty, a dog could often be found on the floor in front of the bar, resting with its massive head between its front paws.

Countless friends performed in bands—some good, some less so—on the Union's second-floor stage. I was there on a few nights when acquaintances were too drunk to play their guitars. I was there when a cover band played a Rolling Stones song, and my best friend Madeline, grabbed my hand and cried. I saw my friend, Rebecca perform with the local burlesque troupe. I remember the back seams of her stockings and how easily she flounced across the stage to "Dream a Little Dream of Me." I was proud of her and I was jealous of how graceful she was. Her boyfriend didn't know she was performing; he wouldn't have liked it.

At the bar, I witnessed couples fighting. I saw people leave together, shyly. I saw mothers take shots of well whiskey and scrunch their noses, shivering. One night, my

best friend's little brother snuck into the bar and was kicked out when he tried to order a Long Island iced tea. The Union was never a good bar for dancing. There wasn't enough room for it. However, at the end of my junior year, on the night when many of my close friends had graduated, the bar was filled with twining bodies, bodies radiating heat, happiness, and apprehension about what was to come.

The walls of the women's restroom were covered in thick layers of black sharpie. "Justin and Angela's Wedding 2013" one might say. "I miss Emily Vogel," read another. Many of the names on the wall were familiar ones. None of the messages were mean-spirited, although some were certainly lewd. All of the scrawls celebrated an event, an inside joke, or a person. One summer, the walls were freshly whitewashed. Within a few weeks, they were covered again.

A month after the Christmas party, Sam asked me to visit him in Dayton. He wanted it to be a romantic weekend. I appreciated that it gave me something to look forward to, and I thought the trip would be a nice break from Athens.

"It feels different from the way it was when we were in college," I told one of my friends who had agreed to feed my cat while I was away.

"How?" she asked.

"It just is," I said. "I can't explain it."

Sam lived just outside the Oregon District, a section of Dayton where gastropubs shared wall space with porn stores. He lived in an industrial apartment with large windows that overlooked the Neon Theater and a barbecue restaurant. Even though I had

a three-day weekend for Martin Luther King Day, I had only planned to stay on Friday and Saturday night. On the Friday night he bought me dinner for the first time.

“It only took you three years to do it,” I said when he picked up the check. He didn’t correct me, but he didn’t laugh either.

After dinner, we watched *Notorious* and drank wine in his dark apartment. I thought about how large his apartment was for one person, just like mine.

“This is the first time I’ve had a girl stay the night here,” he said.

When Ingrid Bergman kissed Cary Grant, I rested my head on Sam’s shoulder.

The next day, an unexpected snow fell rapidly, filling the streets. We had dinner reservations at a steakhouse near the edge of town. Sam had been planning this dinner since after the Christmas party. I wore a red dress printed with raised velvet fans and a pair of steamed stockings. Sam was, as usual, wearing a suit jacket and tie. This was what normal couples do, I thought. Normal couples dress for dinner, they go out before they go to bed together, with their stomachs full and growling and bumping against one another. It felt so unfamiliar to me.

We called a cab to take us to dinner, and we slithered about the roads, sliding through intersections because the roads were so treacherous. We arrived safely at the dimly lit steakhouse. Our waiter spoke in a plummy tone. I had a Caesar salad with real anchovies, a rare steak in a cognac sauce, and potatoes au gratin. Sam picked the wine.

“Do you like your dinner?” Sam asked me, and I nodded, holding his gaze, leaning closer to him over the table. He had to have felt smug; this was exactly the kind of place that would impress me; the restaurant was reminiscent of something in a Billy Wilder movie.

After we ate, as we waited for the cab driver to pick us up, we drank a martini in the restaurant's lounge, where a band had started playing. Lots of couples had arrived to dance, and many bodies were braided together in front of the stage where a man in a sharp suit sang Al Green. Sam asked to take my picture as I held my drink.

"Delete that!" I ordered when he showed me the picture. He shook his head.

"You should really stay an extra night," he said, gently. "The roads are so dangerous, and I'd just feel a lot better if you waited until Monday to leave." I knew he would never just tell me he wanted me to stay because he wanted to be with me, but I smiled anyway. By morning, the roads would be clear, and I would still be in his bed, wearing one of his t-shirts. We would eat scrambled eggs, drink orange juice, and listen to NPR. Like being married, I thought when it happened.

"Let's stay together," the lounge singer begged from the stage.

When I began graduate school, I made an effort to give up much of what characterized my old life—after-hours gatherings at strangers' houses, greasy slabs of square pizza from the late-night shop on Court Street, and cigarettes. I deleted phone numbers of men who had told me to call them if I "wanted to have some fun."

I still allowed myself the Union. I reasoned that there were few other bars for older people to visit, and I was terrified of running into my students during the weekends. My friends in the graduate program enjoyed going to the bar for all of the reasons that had initially attracted me to it—good music, cheap drinks, negligible lighting.

Around this time, I began to catch myself referring to myself as a "townie," a term usually reserved for those who have grown up in Athens, or for those who have

lived here for a long time, usually with no intention of leaving. Most people move to Athens and are gone within four years; the ones I know who have stayed mostly seem to have drinking problems and very little ambition. They seldom work 9-5 jobs, which means nights are long and mornings can be slept through. Many of the townies I know recycle the same stories and relationships. They hold on to years-old grudges over girls or failed bands. They move from house to house, usually remaining in the same neighborhood, sometimes on the same street.

When I think fondly of the townies I know, I think of them as Athens characters, essential to the town. Sometimes when I feel less generous I see them as unmotivated, too old to be partying the way that they do. I see the wear of Athens in the “party bags” under their eyes, in the lines around their mouths. I hear it in their cigarette-choked voices, in their wheezes and coughs. I smell it on their breath at an hour when that should not be acceptable.

There’s a reason people aren’t meant to stay in Athens.

In February, Sam and I decided to celebrate Valentine’s Day together, the prospect of spending the holiday alone in our oversized apartments too depressing to withstand. When Valentine’s Day arrived on a Friday evening, the weather forecast predicted blizzard-like conditions. Sam was hours later than he thought he would be because the road conditions were appalling when he left work on Friday evening. I waited for him, worrying that his decision to come was a dangerous one, but selfishly, I didn’t really care because I wanted him to be with me. My dress hugged me in places I

thought a man would appreciate; waiting alone, I tugged at the fabric. I felt uncomfortable, stretched awkwardly across my sofa, a glass of bourbon in my hands.

When Sam arrived, it was after ten o'clock. He sheepishly handed me a heart-shaped box of chocolates from a Dayton candy store. I placed them on the coffee table in my living room. I thanked him. It was the first time since high school that I'd had romantic plans for the holiday, and I was grateful, even if the night had been a little disappointing thus far. The dinner I had cooked was still warm in the oven, and I fixed him a plate.

"Oh, you shouldn't have waited for me," Sam said. "I stopped and grabbed a burger on the way."

"I wanted to wait for you. I made this dinner for you," I said. I had been ravenous, but I refused eat until he arrived, although it had crossed my mind. I imagined sitting at my dining room table alone, eating the meal I had prepared, and I knew if I tried, I wouldn't have been able to swallow a bite. Even if he wasn't actually hungry, Sam ate several helpings of dinner. We drank wine and listened to Billie Holiday. My downstairs neighbors told us to keep it down.

The next morning we drank Bloody Marys uptown all day. I felt guilty, suspecting it was a bad idea to drink so much, especially since we had reservations at a nice restaurant later that night, but I didn't say anything. After all, when Sam came to Athens it was like a vacation for him. If I complained, I'd just ruin his fun, so instead, I matched him drink for drink.

By the time we were ready for dinner, I was elegantly dressed, but drunk. We ordered dirty martinis with bleu cheese stuffed olives once we were seated at our table. I

remember my steak arriving. Blood seeped from the slices of meat and spread across the plate. I felt sick looking at it. I don't remember much else after that.

I woke up alone on my sofa, still wearing the gold foil skirt and winter white sweater I'd dressed in for dinner. I looked around the dark room, confused. After I turned on a light, I realized that Sam was gone and so were my keys. I called him several times, but he declined my calls.

"I'm at the Union," he said when he finally answered. Then he hung up.

Hours later, after four AM, I called him again when I realized that the bar was closed and he still wasn't home. All of the calls went straight to voicemail and I began to worry—why wasn't he back? Was he doing drugs on the west side of town where after hours parties were usually held? Had he left with another woman? When my phone finally rang, I felt relieved, but the voice on the phone wasn't Sam's.

"I found your boyfriend," a strange man said. "We're outside Dirty Deeds. Can you come get him? He's really drunk,"

"He's not my boyfriend," I said, and then I said, "Yes. I'll be there in five minutes." The old Laundromat was more than a mile away from my house, but in the hours that I'd slept and Sam had been gone, I had sobered up. I threw my fur coat over my pajamas, and luckily, I found a spare key to my car. My hands were clenched on the steering wheel, and I raced across town to find him.

"Get in the car!" I yelled through the open car window when I pulled into the Laundromat's parking lot. He was lying in the middle of the asphalt driveway, smoking a cigarette, mumbling incoherently to the stranger who had found him. The stranger prodded him, pointed at my car, and Sam rose. He blinked into the headlights as he

staggered towards me. On the way back to my apartment, he kept trying to open the car door as the car was in motion.

“Stop it!” I screamed.

When we were back at my place, I told him I couldn’t believe how he had been acting.

“How *I’ve* been acting?” he said. “Why don’t we talk about what *you* did tonight? You threw your carrots at me,” he said.

“No I didn’t,” I said.

“You did.” And I realized I couldn’t really argue with him because I couldn’t remember with any certainty what I’d done at the restaurant; I had never been drunk like that in any place other than a bar before, and I was horrified. I turned away from Sam and began walking back to my bedroom where my gold foil skirt was pooled, as though defeated, on the floor. It didn’t occur to me to ask what he’d done or said to provoke me to act that way at the restaurant.

“Wait!” he called after me. “It doesn’t even matter that you ruined my dinner.” I ignored him and crawled into my bed. He joined me immediately, stroking my face like one might pet a golden retriever. He told me I was pretty, over and over, like the words were a religious chant. I rolled my eyes in the dark.

“It doesn’t even matter that you ruined my dinner,” he said again. “Because I love you.” He ran his fingers through my hair, and he reeked of cheap gin and stale cigarette smoke. He was still wearing his wool pea coat. It was the first time he’d ever said the words to me, and I knew better than to believe him because he’d been drinking so much. I helped him unbutton his coat.

“Move in with me,” he said, slurring the invitation. I said nothing, and I said nothing the next day when he woke up at noon with no recollection of the night after he left the Union. He had no idea how he wound up back in my bed. I apologized again for ruining dinner. He warned me not to do it again. I waited for him to say he was sorry for making me worry about his whereabouts, forcing me to collect him from a stranger just before dawn. Instead, he got out of bed to pour a glass of wine and he asked if we could order pizza.

I was in bed alone when the Union caught on fire; I slept through the sirens. When a friend called to tell me the next morning, I didn’t believe her. I was convinced that she’d heard an exaggerated account, that she was repeating rumors from social media. Then I saw the photos the newspaper and several acquaintances had posted. Buildings uptown, including the Union, were still smoldering. Firefighters had chopped down the Union’s front door. The entire block where the fire started was blockaded, but that hadn’t stopped curious onlookers from milling about the area. I thought about walking uptown to see the damage for myself, but I thought that if I did, it would make the fire and its destruction real.

I learned that the fire was believed to have started because of electrical issues. I was relieved that it hadn’t been intentionally set. The fire had started in apartments above a florist’s shop several doors down from the Union. The flames sprang to neighboring buildings—a head shop, a clothing boutique, The Union, and a microbrewery. Although the Union’s first story hadn’t appeared to sustain much damage in the fire, its roof had collapsed.

I was at the Union several nights before the fire to celebrate my friend Gary's birthday. We asked him where he wanted to go when class ended, and he said, The Union. Our group filled a booth in the bar. I brought take-out from a nearby diner—a tuna melt and French fries. A regular's dog begged for food at my feet. I refused to share, and when I dropped one of my fries into my glass of bourbon, everyone laughed and said I deserved it for being so greedy. I ate the soaked French fry anyway.

“Hey, you guys, there's pizza coming,” one of the bartenders told us as he cleared away our empty glasses. “Help yourselves.” One of the patrons had ordered enough food for everyone, and pizza boxes were set up at the end of the bar. My friends grabbed slices, ordered more beer, and we sat for several more hours in each other's company. I'm not sure why a stranger decided to feed everyone that night. At the time, I was touched by this small gesture because it reminded me of all that can be good about Athens. People are caring here, and generous.

My relationship with Sam ended just as winter lifted, on a day when the sun was shining and it was finally warm enough to wear a dress that exposed my shoulders. Even after Valentine's Day, we had stayed together, although nothing felt quite the same after that night.

I had visited him once more in Dayton. He had cooked me pork stir-fry for dinner. We watched *On the Waterfront* and he cried over Marlon Brando. I wore a brand new dress, one printed with koi fish. The straps of the dress tied in knots at my shoulder. Sam put on a John Coltrane record, and I thought it was cheesy, but I danced with him anyway.

“You’re so sexy,” he said, breathing into my hair. With one hand, he pushed a strap of my dress aside. The other one fell down with it. He kissed my bare shoulders.

As we danced closer together, wine spilled from his glass, staining the bodice of my dress. I immediately rushed to the bathroom, a towel balled in hand, scrubbing at the dress. I only made the stain worse. The purple splotches never came out, not even after I took the dress to a dry cleaner. I hung it in the back of my closet, never to be worn again.

I felt desperate because I wanted him to love me, and I wanted him to love me because I didn’t want to be alone. The night before we broke up, he was visiting me in Athens and I made him dinner—breaded pork chops and red beans and rice, the closest to saying *I love you* that I ever came. We listened to Dr. John as we sat at my dining room table. It was all a Southern Hail Mary.

The next morning, we fucked, and then he got dressed to go, buttoning his pants. I started to cry.

“This is hard,” I said. “You always have to leave.”

“Maybe it’s too hard,” Sam said, zipping his suitcase without looking at me.

“If we’re going to have that conversation, then let’s just have it,” I said.

“It has always felt like play-acting with you,” he told me. The words stung but I realized that he was right, thinking back to why I had gotten involved with him again to begin with: because I was lonely and there wasn’t a better candidate. “You know we bring out the worst in each other,” he said. I should have laughed at the break up cliché, pulled straight from a daytime soap opera, but I agreed. We could dress in fine clothing, make a handsome couple, but could we really get along? I thought of the disastrous

Valentine's Day, of all of the liquor and wine we drank when we were together. Did we drink so much because it was the only way we could stand to be around each other?

"So it's over then," I said, looking at him.

"Well it doesn't have to be. But I just don't see this becoming serious," he said.

"It's over then," I said. He couldn't have it both ways.

When he left me, he was crying, dragging his suitcase down my stairs. I was still holding my cat in my lap, and I didn't know what his tears were for.

"Good, now will you finally stop modeling your relationships after *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*?" my friend Madeline asked when I called to tell her that Sam and I had broken up. I told her I would try; after all, even Elizabeth Taylor had eventually divorced Richard Burton. In fact she did it twice.

I was relieved when he left, but I missed him terribly for a while.

In October 2014, I found out that Sam moved to Portland, Oregon. I wasn't surprised. When we were together, he had spoken often, longingly of moving out west. We still haven't spoken since the day he left my apartment in tears, but I saw the news about his job transfer on the social media account I still can't bear to delete him from.

Sometimes I wonder if he's met someone out west, if he was able to take his cat with him when he moved, if he likes his new job. Sometimes I think about asking him these questions. I wanted to ask him how he felt about the fire at the Union. He had been a regular there for years, just as I had been. I wonder if when he heard the news he thought about the many nights we drank apart there, in our own circles of friends, before finding one another when the bar's lights came on at 2 AM. I know that I did.

“The Union is the only thing I miss about this town,” he said when we were together in Athens. Even after we started dating, he rarely told me that he missed me.

In a few months, I will leave Athens two years later than I initially planned. Almost all of my friends from those first years when I lived here have moved on—to jobs, to marriages, to parenthood. Some have moved back in with their parents, but even that is something different at least.

I have moved on in my own way, still not the fully realized adult I thought I could mold myself to be. I hope to move out of Ohio when I finish my degree, but until then I focus on my writing and work. Sometimes, when I’m alone I still drink too much wine, and I still sleep in, even on weekdays. When I sleep, I do it alone, and I have learned to be okay with that, my cat curled up at my feet, between my legs.

“Isn’t that strange?” the temp at the office where I work part-time asked me on the first day I was in following the fire uptown. “Your favorite bar burns down just as you’re about to leave?” Her eyes widened as she took a sip from her coffee mug printed with Eiffel towers. I wanted to cry, but instead I sat down at my desk and I typed. If I had cried in the bathroom at work, if I had balled my hand in my mouth so no one could hear my sobs ricocheting off the cheap tiles, I wouldn’t *only* have wept for the bar, of course.

When the Union caught fire, when its roof collapsed, I realized that there are a dwindling number of places and people tying me to this town. The streets are filled with strangers, people who are increasingly younger than I am. There are few places for me

beyond the decaying English building where I teach and take classes. My street is quaint, but quiet. Almost every other house is filled with families.

There are some places I am now too old to really enjoy in this town, like the ramshackle party houses near the dorms; the bars that serve fluorescent blue drinks, the ones with sticky floors, and appalling bathrooms; the burrito restaurant that is open until around 3 AM but isn't really worth the indigestion.

Months after the fire, the sidewalk is still closed in front of the businesses that were damaged. The historic buildings are fragile and can collapse at any moment. Their windows are smoke-wreathed, their doorways are demarcated by police tape. I walk past these buildings routinely, and I am no longer surprised by the damage. I have accepted it; it has become a new backdrop in this town. The Union's owners vow that they will rebuild the bar. I'm happy for this news, but realize that if the bar reopens, it will be after I am gone.

What I always remember about the Union besides the people, the music, and the drinks are those high, untarnished copper ceilings—the secret opulence. I know that copper retains its brownish-pink luster, the same color of a cat's button nose or Rita Hayworth's hennaed hair, until just before its melting point. When I look at the building, I note its jagged roof, like an open mouth. I know that the Union's glorious copper ceilings are surely black and twisted now, just debris, wreckage—a ruin.



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