What to Expect

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2019

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Abstract

What to Expect is a work of creative nonfiction—more specifically, a book of essays about womanhood, loss, and power as told through four generations of women in my family. Lyric and experimental in form, this work is interested in crafting truth and memory with line-level attention, associative leaps, and metaphor. My hope is that this work will contribute to scholarship on lyric essay and personal narratives, as well as expand the growing cannon of this innovative genre.

Dedication

For my nieces, who bring me no end of joy.

Acknowledgements

I've been incredibly lucky to work under the guidance of Elissa Washuta, Angus Fletcher, and Lina Ferreira during my time at OSU. Thanks also to my writing partners, whose generous feedback has made all the difference.

Vita

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: An Incomplete History of the Times We Did and Didn't Leave

My cat's eyes are crossed, which I didn't notice until she was several years old. My roommate took a picture of us—me at the kitchen counter, the cat perched on a stool—and I saw it: her pupils, both pointing slightly inward toward her small, pink nose.

I never noticed my mom's eyes either, I said.

Can she see out of it? a friend once asked of my mother's left eye. I started to respond, *of course*, *of course my mother can see*, and then realized that I didn't know the answer.

*

There's a moment my mother returns to when she talks about her life.

It was summer, and she was spending the weekend in Kansas with her college roommate. They were playing with the roommate's nieces and nephew around the family's lake in Bonner Springs. The children belonged to the roommate's older brother M, who was nothing more than a vague figure in my mother's periphery: hands tucked into pockets, stubble shadowing the soft

line of his jaw. She wore a bikini. I have never seen my mother in a bikini, but it was the summer before her junior year of college, and she's certain about the bikini.

Just before she jumped into the water, she paused to remove her glasses, then turned and tucked them into M's shirt pocket.

This is the moment my mother pinpoints, an act as innocent as any other. I can see it play out: her almost-leap, how she spins around on her bare heel, hides the wire-framed glass in the nearest safe place. The movement's a reflex by now; she doesn't even consider it. She locks eyes, briefly, with M. By the time she's underwater, she already knows what's coming.

*

At a few months old, my mother's eyes slid closer together as if focused on a bee hovering just over the bridge of her nose. When her portrait was taken as a baby, the photographer placed her facing away from the camera, capturing her likeness in profile alone. And so maybe this is how early it started, I think now: her inherent skill for denial, for looking in the other direction.

After my mother's corrective surgery, during which her eyes were drawn back, forcibly, to where they belonged, the family of six made the long drive from Missouri to Texas for Christmas. An older child, a cousin perhaps, wandered up to my grandmother and asked what was wrong with the baby's eye, it seems to have crossed, and didn't she just have surgery to fix

this? The family piled back into the car and rushed home, unopened Christmas presents jostling around in the trunk, to the surgeon who had promised to fix her.

A second surgery was deemed impossible. My mother had fluid in the deepest cavities of her brain—a mild but present case of hydrocephalus—and so the eye would have to stay as it was. But the other one, don't you see? The other eye is perfect.

*

If you buy a meal at Marlene's in Williamsburg, Missouri, you're granted free admission to the antiques museum in the back. What started as a personal collection of Marlene's husband bloomed into a time capsule of the area, including a staged Victorian-era bedroom complete with a simple but stunning wedding dress, a brown ribbon cinched around the waist. My mother wore it on her first wedding day.

Before she gave it to the museum, the dress was stored in my grandmother's basement for nearly three decades. My grandmother made it herself, by hand, while my mother finished her last semester of college. The long-sleeved, high-necked lace was too intricate to throw away, despite the facts of the marriage.

Despite the facts of the marriage, my sister: fair-haired and shirtless and beaming, her eyes ringed like Saturn, flashing like flecks of the sun.

*

When I ask my mother what she sees when she looks at me, she removes her glasses and gestures to the air beside my right shoulder.

I see you, and I see a part of you, she says. She describes it as a shadow, this other part of me. She sees it only when she makes herself; otherwise, her brain reduces me to one.

I find something poetic about this description, like she sees more of me than I am, or she sees another version of me, a shadow of who I might have been had my life gone differently. But then, my mother looks at everyone this way, if she tries. Everyone around her appears larger than they are; everyone exists in shadow.

*

Before the wedding dress in the basement, before my mother's siblings left for college and her still several years behind, my grandmother packed her suitcase every Sunday, or so the story goes.

She was so unhappy about something, always unhappy. Over the years, explanations were proffered in half-hearted attempts to explain it: growing up during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl—first hungry, then choking. Her favorite brother, Nobel, killed in a tractor accident

at sixteen. Her deeply Texan roots—there's something about Texan women, don't you agree? My mother mentions a year in an institution, when my mother was an infant, but no one ever spoke of it.

There's no denying my grandmother was a difficult woman. She spared me her difficulty, for the most part, except the time she woke me in the middle of the night begging me to cut her throat (the dementia was at its worst then). I adopted the family narrative: she is difficult, that is all, don't trouble yourself with questions.

And yet, the suitcase. I find myself wondering how she packed her clothes. Did she tuck the slips and blouses away with care, or tangled abandon? Did she plan to take her children with her, even just the son, who everyone says she loved the most? How did it feel to unpack the suitcase week after week, a silent acknowledgement of her lack of power?

As for me, there was no suitcase. I didn't anticipate the leaving. I just realized one day that it had to be done.

*

My eyes resemble my sister's, in form more than color: the outer ring a deep blue, encircling a gradient of muted tones: green to rust to gold, a shadow around the pupil that reminds me of the moon before it rains. My sister's gradient exists on a lighter palette than mine, but it's clear our

eyes are related to each other, or it's clear we are related to each other if you were to focus on our eyes.

This is important to me—the resemblance of our irises—because there's so little else about us that suggests *sisters*.

*

To fix the weaker eye, my mother's pediatrician prescribed an eye patch. It was placed over the stronger eye, the theory being that it would force the damaged one to correct itself.

But the left eye panicked, darting back and forth and blurring her surroundings into such a jumble that she doubled over to vomit.

They continued with the eye patch method for two years before conceding that it didn't help.

*

When my mother met M, she was twenty and he was thirty, divorced, and had three children. That she fell in love with him (if she did fall in love with him) both fascinates and bewilders me.

When I ask what attracted her to M, she remembers long letters and small gifts. Her parents' admiration. His liberal political leanings. The way he stepped outside in his white socks, and she realized how deeply he needed her help.

There are few pictures of M in our collection now, but I still startle when I see him sitting around the table with the rest of my family. He has a head of thick, dark hair, and on one visit he's wearing a gray V-neck shirt with a gold chain around his neck. He has an easy smile. My mother is not in the frame, so I assume she's behind the camera. I wonder if she takes pride in how seamlessly he fits in. I wonder if she realizes yet that she must leave him.

*

I don't remember the shade of my grandmother's eyes. I don't have a single color photograph of her.

*

Once, my partner of nearly three years misremembered my eyes as being brown.

Do you even know who I am? I shouted, like he was not standing two feet in front of me.

*

My sister was married in the jungle exhibit of the zoo where she worked as an elephant keeper. It was her day off, and a handful of us gathered in a building that imitated a tropical rainforest. My mother's glasses fogged over when she walked in and out of the building, and she would have to pause for several moments until the lenses cleared. I stood behind my sister's shoulder, and my mother situated herself with the groom's family, apart from M and his wife.

It was nothing like my mother's first wedding, to M, the high-necked lace stretching over her throat. It was nothing like her second, to my father, her collarbones open to the sun.

It was nothing like my grandmother's wedding in her parents' backyard, the young bride smoothing the knee-length skirt of her suit, straightening the dishes of the potluck lunch.

And it was nothing like mine, a corset-backed gown that sucked the air from my lungs, concerned but polite guests seated on two sides of an impossibly long aisle. When the photographer held his camera inches from my face, I couldn't bring myself to look into the lens, so in the resulting portrait I'm glancing to my left, the lines around my eyes suggesting that I'm much older than nineteen.

Before my sister's husband was her husband, he apologized to me for sleeping with another woman. He and my sister had come to terms with it already, and I wondered if the apology was part of the terms, or if he couldn't bear to sit next to me without acknowledging what he'd done. I lifted my shoulders, released them. Absolved him of his sins with my silence.

After my sister's wedding ceremony, the photographer arranged the couple in front of the zoo's elephant enclosure. The sun was setting by then. My sister looked directly ahead.

*

In seventh-grade math class, I sat behind a girl who loved to speak. She was always twisting around in her seat to speak to me, and on one of these occasions, she said—loudly—*what's that dot in your eye?*

I didn't know what she was talking about. When I got home that day, I went straight to the bathroom mirror, and there it was: a small dot in the lower ring of my left iris. My mother had all of my school pictures framed on her bedroom wall, and I pressed my face close to each and inspected my left eye. The freckle first appeared in my fifth-grade portrait. *Two years*, I marveled. Two years I hadn't noticed.

*

I started dating young—hardly adolescent, still awkward in a shapeless body. Near the end of our year-long coupledom, my first boyfriend was playing with an umbrella while I sat cross-legged on my bed. He jabbed the unfolded contraption toward my face. It should have been inches away, but he accidentally hit the release button as he jabbed, and it shot out with such force that when it struck my eye socket, I cried out in pain.

For years my response to physical pain was laughter, mostly due to the surprise of it. Surprise when I tripped and slid across the floor of my third-grade classroom, my brow connecting with a table leg and bursting open. Surprise when I dropped a heavy glass orb on my head while changing a lightbulb, and concussed myself.

The boyfriend and I laughed at the pain he gave me. His laughter, I imagine, derived from relief. Mine was purely from shock. I was only beginning to understand pain as something that could be inflicted by someone else's hand.

*

M hit my mother for the first time the night before their wedding.

She had just returned from a trip to Boston, where she accepted an award for a story she wrote in her college newspaper. It was her first time on the East Coast, and she took to it immediately.

The other honorees were offered jobs at local publications. My mother could have accepted one too, but she was supposed to get married. Her grandparents—she reminds me, every time she tells the story—were driving all the way from Texas.

She made such a beautiful bride.

*

When I was eight years old, my mother arranged my first eye exam in the same building where she had undergone corrective surgery as an infant.

I don't remember this scene, but she recalls it clearly: within seconds of our entrance, a white-haired physician broke from his group of short-coated medical students to approach us. He asked who did her surgery; she gave the name.

You know we can fix that now, he said. My mother acknowledged that she knew.

But her brain corrected for the shadows; she hadn't seen them in years. She had looked in the other direction long enough to literally change what she was seeing. Over this, she had power.

*

In the end, M was the one to leave my mother, for another woman. But first: eight long years.

*

When I met my future husband, S, I was seventeen and he was twenty. He had rejected college to pursue a career in skateboarding; his body was covered in soft, puckered scars and perpetually smelled of sweat. That I fell in love with him (if I did fall in love with him) both bewilders and fails to surprise me.

The only pictures I have of us now are our wedding photos, which I recovered out of morbid curiosity. *Who was I on this day?* I wonder when I look through them. In one, I am smiling so hard that my right eye squints to half the size of its mate.

One night, I dream that I marry again, and then divorce my new husband even faster than S. People on the street point at me: look, there she goes, the woman who can't stay married. Can you believe she did it again?

I wake with all the lights still on. It's three in the morning, and I can't go back to sleep.

*

When I ask my mother how it feels to be single for over thirty years of her adult life, she says she's content.

But I had you girls, she says. *I have granddaughters. It would probably be different, if I didn't.*

*

I don't leave Missouri until I'm twenty-six, and even then, I tell myself it's only temporary. I have little love for the landlocked state, other than its cheap rent and uncrowded streets, but I

can't imagine being removed from my family for long. *We're a small family*, I tell friends who don't understand. What I usually mean is: *my mother's alone*. Or, just as often: *my nieces fill an emptiness I've lived with for a long time.*

*

I don't ask my mother if M ever blackened her eye. For the most part, she's told me, the abuse was emotional: kicking her out of their home when she was pregnant; accusing her of affairs; keeping the baby when she fled to a friend's, knowing she'd return by morning.

I do ask if he ever mentioned the left eye.

He told me once that the only thing better would be if I were missing a leg, she says.

I taste something like bile in my throat. My mother laughs, as if she's just told a great joke.

*

On the day of my wedding, I left my mother and sister at the hair salon, insistent that I drive to the church by myself. I wanted to be alone, perhaps for the last time in a while.

The leather seat warmed my back, and I tried not to look at myself in the rearview mirror—too

much makeup, hair pulled sharply from my face. At the church, my dress dangled in its garment bag, waiting. The bodice hugged my torso and hips, so unlike the first dress I'd chosen, which gathered around my chest and fell in a parachute to the floor. I'd been pregnant then, but no longer. What began as a shotgun wedding wasn't one anymore, and so no one understood it, and I could not explain.

As I pulled into the parking lot, it occurred to me that I didn't have to stay. My overnight bag was inside. I could walk in, collect my things, and leave.

When I got to the dressing room, I discovered two of my bridesmaids had arrived early. They mistook my distress as a case of cold feet, and helped me into my dress.

*

In the final years of my grandmother's life, her memory of me seemed to end shortly after my marriage. She displayed my wedding album in her room at the assisted living facility alongside keepsakes of other familial milestones. Each time I visited she asked after S, and I would concoct a story about his whereabouts.

On one visit, I slipped the album into my bag when she wasn't looking and threw it in the trunk of my car. It worked: my grandmother forgot about S. But then, she forgot a bit of me, too.

*

Every year, the ophthalmologist measures the circumference of the freckle in my left eye, like the dermatologist measures the mole on the right side of my neck.

I don't know what they're looking for, but no matter; it never grows.

*

My sister and I don't speak of the abuse. I'm not sure she's aware it existed. She loves M, her dead father, and it seems cruel to point out his cruelties.

We avoid the topic of my fathers, too: the biological one, who abused so many drugs he cannot function; nor the man I knew to be my father, who my mother married when I was two years old. Because I spent most of my waking moments with him, I cared more for my father than my mother and sister. Every morning, I watched them get ready together in our single bathroom, then leave for their lives apart from me. They seemed like a pair. Still, we exist in pairs: my mother and sister, my mother and me; never a group of three.

M and my father loathed each other, in the way only men vying for power do. They fought until they broke us apart, my sister moving in full-time with M. For most of my life, I interpreted this moment as my sister choosing him over us, until my mother revealed my stepfather's ultimatum: either my sister moved out, or he would. In my mother's version of the story, she gave her

daughter the choice. In my sister's version, there is no choice if you must be asked.

My mother divorced my father after four years. He lived in our basement until he died—still my favorite person years after he vanished belowground, until I understood what he cost me—and then my mother and I moved away. We left my sister with M.

If men exist as wedges between me and the women I love most, is it any wonder that I dream of leaving them?

*

One Christmas, I stood outside my sister's home with my mother and sister, and the partner who misremembered the color of my eyes. It was unseasonably warm in Kansas; my sister's arms were bare, and I stood shoeless in the yellowed grass.

Without warning, my partner ran inside the house to save our dinner from one of the dogs. My mother and sister looked on approvingly.

You really should marry him, my sister said. *A guy who pays that much attention*. My mother nodded in agreement.

I watched as he lifted the ham and carried it to safety.

*

Before M, at a party in college, another student offered my mother a ride home on his motorcycle.

Only he did not take her home, not at first. He kept driving until they were outside of city limits, and then he told her that if she did not have sex with him, he would leave her there.

I don't mean to imply this man pushed my mother to M. I know better than that. I know better because when I met my version of this man, it was after my marriage. He left his fingerprints in my blood on the soft, inner cup of my prettiest bra. I was surprised by the gore of it, but not by the happening.

One violent man does not lead you to the next. Though it may condition you for future violence.

*

On our wedding night, ensconced in our new apartment and aching from hunger, S and I made quesadillas and watched one of the *Transformers* movies.

Beneath the bathroom sink, I'd stowed the lingerie a friend had insisted I purchase after learning I was unprepared. Of the myriad seductive choices, I selected a chaste set: pale pink and covered

in butterflies. S and I hadn't had sex since the miscarriage. I feigned traditionalism, though it was really a lack of desire, or maybe fear.

S told me we didn't have to have sex that night, and my eyes welled with relief. *I married a kind man*, I thought.

A few months later, in the fall, I was at work when I got a message from S. I've forgotten the arrangement of his words, but the meaning was clear: I was failing as a wife because I consistently refused sex.

I stepped away from my desk so my coworkers couldn't see my hands, the way they shook.

*

Of course, there was the before.

That first summer: S's parents in Hawaii, my mother working extra night shifts at the hospital. I practically lived in his home, a crumbling but beautiful Victorian they would later discover was teeming with black mold.

We weren't having sex yet. There was no air conditioning in the house, and the heat swelled unbearably. I slept in his shirts, still uncomfortable in my nakedness.

Leaving the bathroom one morning to return to bed, I stopped to stare at my reflection in the full-length mirror. His shirt fell at the top of my thighs, dark against my bare legs. From where I stood, I could just make out the freckle in my left eye. My hair was long and mussed in the way I recognized from women in movies. I was seventeen.

I'm still unsure if I fell in love with S that summer, or if I confused our relationship with my entrance into womanhood. I would argue, at any rate, that arriving into one's womanhood is more heady an experience than falling in love.

*

My nieces, still wild and young, both have brown eyes. When my sister was pregnant with each of them, people would comment how beautiful it would be if the baby was born with my sister's golden hair, her light eyes.

The girls have dark hair, twisted in coils that frizz out into haloes around their implausibly expressive faces. Their eyes are illuminated, identical. Tell me what could be more beautiful than that.

*

New to living on our own, without my father or sister, my mother and I decided to try a new

church. The service was charismatic, or evangelical. A woman stood in the aisle and wielded a red flag like a sword, pumping it high above her shoulder and swooping it down to flare out just below her feet. A man in the audience had a thick, yellow snake coiled around his neck. I remained unbothered by it all—much of our extended family was evangelical—until I noticed that my vision was going. It started at the outer corners, the edges turning black and the darkness encroaching closer to the center of my sight, which was focused on the screen projecting lyrics before me. I tugged on my mother's sleeve.

I can't see, I whispered. My mother, thinking it was the lyrics I couldn't see, scooted over.

No, I said, louder this time. There was nothing left but two pricks of white light. *I can't* see.

She took me by the arm and guided me from the building to our car, and I saw nothing, not even a sliver of light, all the way home. I could sense that she was leading me to her bedroom, and I lowered myself onto the mattress and fell asleep almost instantly.

It was a migraine, my mother told me when I woke. I could see her sitting on the edge of the bed, as clearly as I'd ever seen her before.

*

A year after I leave Missouri, my mother calls to ask the date of my birthday. She's always

confused the dates of her daughters' birthdays, but it used to be a flash of uncertainty. If she paused a moment, she knew the months and days and years and times she birthed us, how much we weighed down her arms, how long we stretched once outside of her body. She knew. She used to know. She has ceased knowing.

*

The last time I fell asleep with my mother beside me, I was feigning unconsciousness. There was an IV in the crook of my arm, filling my body with morphine, and I could feel it dragging me somewhere else, but I stayed for as long as I could.

My first boyfriend had grown into a nurse. He stood in the doorway and asked my mother if I was all right. My mother assured him that I was.

And for some reason this is the moment that comes to mind each time I try to pick the one I would pinpoint, but it's not a crossroad, this moment—there's nothing I can change. My body saw fit to terminate the pregnancy, to correct the mistake it made when it took too many chromosomes from either me or S. My body took mercy on me, and the girl's, by ending it before we both suffered more.

But really I'm ignoring the crossroad, pretending as if I had no choice. There's an engagement ring on my finger, and I could remove it if I wanted to. I could go on with my life as if none of this ever happened.

I keep my eyes closed, and go elsewhere.

*

Before my sister had children, I wondered what would become of us after our mother died. Would we remain sisters, or with our last connection missing, would she be absorbed into her paternal family and I be left behind?

My nieces spared me from total untethering. I see nothing of myself in them—we must share so few genes, the daughters of my half-sister—but they call for me when I'm not there, a new name of their own creation.

When M died before the birth of my second niece, I thought *finally*. I thought *finally, I'm safe*. Not from violence—he had not been violent, I'm told, since he left my mother—but with both of our fathers gone, there's finally no one left between us.

*

Even as the vessels in her brain constrict to the point of danger, my mother refuses to acknowledge what's happening. *It's nothing more than aging*, she says. It's working nights for fifteen years. Everyone forgets. Everyone fails to remember some things.

Her anger surfaces in an instant; she resents that I won't let her look in the other direction, where old age is just old age and it's okay that she forgot where she keeps her bowls.

Beyond the forgetting and the anger lies more evidence I can't bring myself to cite: I can no longer depend on her to guide me. My fear is two-fold. It's enough to cover the both of us, our uncertain futures in which we'll almost certainly be lost to each other, well before the final leaving.

*

In the womb, a baby's eyes are not fully developed until the twenty-six-week mark.

My womb was long empty by twenty-six weeks, the remains of my would-be daughter scraped from my body and sent off for chromosome testing to understand what went wrong.

A baby in utero can detect light from the outside, though, sometime between the eleventh and fourteenth week. My pregnancy ended in week eleven. It might have been the morning that I woke and went to my mother—*I don't feel the baby anymore*—or maybe it happened before that, and my body was just then recognizing the drop of hormones.

Regardless, I wonder now if she detected light, just once, from outside my body. If I was able to show her a piece of the world in one small but not insignificant way.

*

I am surprised to learn my mother doesn't remember the leaving moment—when M finally walked away, or failed to return. But then, I don't remember my own.

There were the escrow papers I couldn't bring myself to sign, my mother's Boston fable re-emerging from the part of my consciousness she built to protect me. There was the evening S came home from work to find me on the bedroom floor, too depressed to stand; the counseling appointment where he confessed relief for the miscarriage; the time we screamed over who would get possession of the television, a wedding gift neither of us cared about.

My true leaving moment is at a gas station, the last one before the highway. My mother offers her credit card for the machine. She puts her arms around me, her nineteen-year-old daughter, newly divorced and moving a few hours north for college, and we both laugh so we don't cry. I get behind the wheel and feel something like triumph. Something like freedom. I don't ever want to let go of it.

In a few years, my mother's neurologist will hint that this is the moment it probably started. It's hard on the brain, to be alone.

Chapter 2: Why We're Here

In the blue house where we lived as a family when I was small, just barely on the Missouri side of Kansas City, I would sit on the couch and watch bolts of lightning come down on my sister's head.

She loved to sit on the concrete steps and watch storms roll in, and from my vantage point on the safe side of the screen door, I felt as if I were watching her almost-death over and over again. My family laughed at my childish fears, my misunderstanding of space and distance, but I had seen the way a body could be living one night and dead by morning, and I didn't find the possibility amusing.

On evenings when the sky took on a greenish tone and my parents and sister gathered outside in the hopes of spotting a funnel cloud, I prepared: rounding up our cats and tossing them on the basement steps; powering the storm radio and setting it on the washing machine, where it echoed across the damp, concrete room; dragging the spare mattress onto the floor so we could pull it over our bodies.

My fear as catalyst for safety. My family aboveground, outside, risking everything.

*

My first recurring nightmare began when I was five years old. The plot was simple: a giant ant would appear at night, thrashing its many limbs through the roof of our house, crushing first my sister where she slept in her attic bedroom, and then my parents in their room next to mine. The source of the dream was easy to place: inspired by the movie *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, in which distracted father Wayne Szalinski accidentally shrinks his two children and the neighbor kids down to the size of apple seeds and abandons them in the wilds of the family's backyard, where they're made to live among giant insects and subsist on a stray Oatmeal Cream Pie.

The ant of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* is, in actuality, friendly—going so far as to sacrifice its life to save the children from a rogue scorpion—so I can't say why my subconscious turned my ant into a monster. Maybe any living thing larger than humans must necessarily be feared.

In the dream, I never died. I would stand in our front yard and look at the ruins of my house, feel the loss of everyone I loved. As if that sort of fear was something that could be held.

*

I dreamed of the ants for three nights in a row, and then I prayed to never have the dream again,

and I didn't. This is the moment I believed in a god, one who showed mercy. Though perhaps it was myself I should have thanked. I no longer wanted to tell myself that particular story, so I stopped.

*

My father, I realize now, was often an object of fear for strangers. The long hair, loping stride, trench coat grazing his ankles. Now, when I see men on the street who look like him, I want to know what's hidden under their coats.

Once he married my mother, by the lake in a gated community where he worked security, my near-constant presence softened his appearance: as a two-year-old, I looked and sounded like an animated Disney character, a cross between Snow White and one of her woodland creatures. Later, my face would stretch and hair grow tangled, and the circles beneath my eyes would deepen to new shades of bruised blue, so when we went to the hospital on my seventh birthday, a nurse would think it was me who needed care instead of my father, whose lung was collapsing.

Once he married my mother, everything was different, though I wouldn't remember the time when we were three: my mother, my sister, and me. Sometimes I forget that I was born before my parents' wedding day. Like the first time you see your teacher outside of school and realize they have another life.

*

During college, I was speaking to a friend about my childhood and stopped mid-sentence when I said the word *parents*. You don't realize how long it's been since you've used a certain word until you say it again. Twenty years could go by.

*

At ten, eleven, twelve, my sister dreamed of being a marine biologist. She'd never seen the ocean, but she was desperate to swim with sharks.

Six years older than me, she'd learned early on that she could make me cry with just a story. I was terrified of sharks—a consequence of watching *Jaws* with my family when I was four—and so she would tell me about her future in the ocean, diving with Great Whites, and my fear would wreck me. I would beg her to change her mind, to choose another dream, when what I was really saying was *don't leave me.*

As it turned out, my sister would go on to become a zookeeper. She'd work primarily with elephants, slipping through the bars of their enclosure to bathe them, lead them on morning walks through the still-sleeping zoo, and I wasn't surprised when she confessed that elephants are the most dangerous, statistically, to work with; my sister's always been larger than her fear.

*

The man I'm seeing has lived his life on the west coast, so when we pull up to my apartment in Ohio as the tornado sirens sound off, he isn't sure what to make of them. I'm not at all surprised by the sound. It's spring in the Midwest, thirty degrees warmer than it was yesterday.

I hurry upstairs to gather my cats, stuff them into separate carriers, then lead the man I'm seeing to the laundry room in the basement. On my phone I study the radar, try to remember where we are on the map. I explain how a funnel cloud could be spotted three counties away, but still our sirens will sound off. This is why people ignore them, I say. The sirens that cried wolf. A lifetime of warnings and not a single consequence.

No other tenants join us in the basement, and the man I'm seeing starts to look dubious. I allow for a trip outside to check for a green-tinged sky, the sound wind makes when it's building too fast. Finally, I admit my skepticism. We go upstairs and order takeout while I keep trying to convince him that the worst might have happened, could still.

*

My second recurring nightmare was of a Tyrannosaurus Rex killing my father. Another easy one to place: I loved *Jurassic Park*, which came out when I was three. Dinosaurs had no fear currency over me—I could no more shrink to the size of an insect than dinosaurs could be revived by a crystallized mosquito, so I was free to be entertained.

This one started when I was six, and in the special group I was placed in for children experiencing loss, I drew pictures of the scene over and over again: my father's body on the ground, a monster hovering above, consuming him.

I didn't tell my father about the dream. He'd been sick all his life, but he wasn't going to die.

*

If she and her husband were to go on a trip alone, my sister says, she wants them on separate planes so the girls don't lose both parents.

If all four are to go, she wants them on the same plane. If they must die, they'll die together. No one left behind to grieve alone.

*

We were a family of four once. We lived in a cabin first, my sister and I sleeping feet-to-feet on the couch, the dog sometimes joining and pushing one of us to the floor. In the morning, I'd climb into my parents' bed and wait for my mother to wake. If she took too long, my father and I would place the pet rats, Ludwig and Wolfgang, on her chest.

Later, we moved back into the townhouse where my mother had lived with my sister, and then

my sister and me. We had our own bedroom then, with bunkbeds. At night, I'd call up my fears to my sister—usually Ursula, or the wolves from *Beauty and the Beast*—and she'd tell me I was safe.

It was in the blue house that we began to fracture. My sister in her own room upstairs. Our fathers screaming at each other on the front lawn, or outside her school across the street. My father on the internet meeting women he didn't need to meet.

The day my sister left to live full-time with her father, I found my mother in her bedroom, beating her fists against the wall.

Not long after, in the same bedroom, I told my mother that I'd seen my father kiss another woman. I hadn't known what I was saying then. We finished the movie the three of us were watching together, and sometime later—days or weeks, I couldn't say—my father moved out.

If you were to ask me now, I'd say that I grew up with my mother. I'd say it was just the two of us. It's easier to compress time this way, to start marking time only in the after.

*

I haven't lived through a tornado, but I've walked through the ruins of one.

The summer after my sophomore year of college, I stayed in my apartment to work as a reporter at the local paper rather than going home to live with my mother. Over the course of thirty-two minutes, an EF-5 tornado stripped the small city my mother lived in to its foundation. It gained in size and intensity as it tracked eastward through the city's most populated areas, destroying a hospital and a high school, killing 161 people and injuring nearly 1,200 others. I couldn't get through to anyone I loved, so I threw a few things into a duffel bag and got in my car and drove.

For the next week, I led two reporters from my paper through the blown-apart streets, everything flat and sepia-toned, and spoke to people standing in the heaps of their homes. I didn't know anyone on the list of dead and missing that I carried in my pocket, so my grief at the gaping wound of this place I'd lived in for only eight years felt misplaced. Leaving felt wrong too, though I did eventually. In my perfectly whole college town, everyone around me complaining about the heat and cicadas, I thought only *we're all so close to ruin, don't you feel it? Can't you tell?*

*

For thirteen years, I've slept to a recording of thunderstorms. A storm that's just a storm—no potential of escalating—is one of my greatest comforts. When I was a child and it rained, my family would stop what we were doing and gather in the living room to read. I still practice this ritual, in the apartment where I live alone, and for however long it rains, we're together again.

*

Starting over with a new therapist is an exercise in exposition. I've grown used to rattling off the list: abandoned by biological father; discovered grandfather's body when I was five; stepfather died of cystic fibrosis when I was seven, after which I learned he wasn't my real father; favorite uncle died of HIV/AIDS when I was fifteen; grandmother diagnosed with Alzheimer's when I was seventeen; lost the family farm—my grieving place—when I was eighteen; miscarriage when I was eighteen; grandmother (who had long forgotten me) died when I was twenty-five; my mother's memory loss—the veins in her brain shrinking, her personality shifting incrementally—finally acknowledged when I was twenty-seven.

Over a year into our sessions, my therapist says, *I'm worried that you've identified with loss for so long, you're* becoming *loss.*

I think about her words for months, startled by their implication that I have a choice.

*

I've grown used to rattling off the list, but I'll never grow used to my mother being on it. We lost so many—*we*, the both of us—but I was supposed to have her, exactly as she was, for decades longer. My jealousy flares in unexpected moments. In an early episode of *The Golden Girls*, when Dorothy fears her mother is dying and begs for more time, I hate Dorothy for her selfishness. She could spare me twenty of her fictional years and still have her fictional mother

longer than I may have my real one, or at least the mother I recognize. I want more time. Tell me where time grows on trees and maybe I won't become loss.

*

When my first niece was born, there were six of us in the waiting room, all desperate to meet her. Later, in the cafeteria, my mother and I complained about my sister's stepmother, how she wouldn't let anyone else hold the baby. We complained about M, how he stood pacing outside my sister's room so he got to go in first.

Three years later, when my second niece was born, I requested to be in the delivery room. M had since died, and my sister invited her stepmother and our mother inside, too. My sister's husband stood at the top of the bed and I hovered at the foot, prepared—at my sister's request—to record the birth moment. All of us so eager to meet our new girl.

Twenty-six years earlier, when I was born, my mother labored alone. No one paced outside or waited anxiously in the waiting room. My mother's parents drove up eventually, and my biological father appeared to sign the birth certificate, maybe the following day, or the one after that.

By a strange twist of fate, my sister was already at the hospital when I was born—accompanying her cousin, who'd broken his femur in a sledding accident—and this is usually how I framed the

story of my birth. I loved the coincidence of it, how my sister seemed drawn to us, how she pitched herself from the doomed sled just in time.

Sometime later, when I began to obsess over the impending loss of my mother, I started to tell the story differently. It felt wrong that no one had showed up for me, like I'd started off on a lonely note I was fated to keep singing. The only person in my life who'd seen me enter the world now leaving it.

The man I'm seeing listened to the newest iteration of my birth story, and then he shifted the focus to my mother. *It's kind of beautiful*, *though, isn't it?* he said. *Just being alone with this new person you've made.*

I wasn't ready for that story yet, may still not be, but I like knowing it's there, waiting for me.

*

I may never know what it's like to hold a new person of my own creation, and most days I would say that's what I want, and I would be telling the truth. Other days, I'll allow myself to remember the moments of joy I felt during my brief pregnancy—joy, yes, even though I was barely grown—and I would say that I can't risk that loss again, I am too afraid, and I would also be telling the truth.

*

When I start dreaming of my mother, I never have the same dream twice.

In the first, she has a wound on her face: an entire flap of skin detached from her cheek. In the way of dreams, I know somehow that I've done this to her. I beg her to go to the hospital, but she refuses—says it's nothing, says she doesn't have the time. I look in a mirror and realize I have a similar wound on my face, though smaller, and I go to the hospital to have it stitched, angry that she won't also seek help.

The second is set during an apocalypse, the sort driven by a plague that steals a person's memories, their themness, before turning them violent. I'm riding in a blacked-out van when I spot my mother sitting alone on a park bench, and I tell my companions that I'll take care of this one alone. *I might need a minute*, I say.

My mother smiles at me as I approach, and we speak words lost to the dream, and though I'm aware of the handgun on my hip and what I need to do, I'm struck by the realization that she's still in there. *Let's go*, I say, and I lead her back to the van, so relieved that I found her before it was too late, that I didn't write her off as lost.

*

When I turn twenty-eight, my sister sends me a video of her daughters in the bathtub together,

singing me happy birthday. Before the video stops, my older niece—four at the time—yells out: *I love you, I love you, I love you so much I could stop.* My sister laughs, says that's not how it works, but my niece and I understand each other.

*

For years when I was growing up, I resented my sister for not coming to the hospital when my father was dying. I told myself a story about her selfishness. I told a story that she chose M over my mother and me.

It wasn't until I was in college that I learned of my father's ultimatum: either my sister left, or he would. Another conversation, years later, revealed that just before the ultimatum, my sister's guardian ad litem warned that one more custody suit and the state would decide both M and my mother were unfit parents and take my sister and me away.

There are so many kinds of fear, I know now. Fear of the people we love dying, slowly or by sudden catastrophe; fear of them loving someone else more than they love us; fear of them lying; fear of them leaving; fear of interference; fear of fate; fear of reading in one's home on a Sunday evening when the walls are ripped apart; fear of being forgotten; fear of being so fearful of being forgotten that we stop loving them first (I'm so scared I'll stop loving her).

I wanted to write a book about losing my father, and then I started losing my mother. I wanted to

write a book about choosing to stay alone—no partner, no children—and then I realized that part of me privileges independence because to elect being alone means never having aloneness forced on me.

If this is a book about loss, then my loss will exist as an entity outside of me. I will run my hands across the cover and place it on the shelf, alongside books I love—some also about loss and loneliness, some about love and wandering and wounds—and then I'll invite you into my home and when you ask what I've lost, I'll point to the book instead of to myself. I'll tell you that I fear so many things, that I'll learn to fear things I never thought to fear before, but sometimes a warning is just a warning, a sound is just a sound.

Chapter 3: Home, Someday

"It is a most ordinary disruption, necessarily awful, sometimes severe—
especially for mothers and daughters."
—Melissa Febos

I.

Driving my mother's car down the gravel road near her house, I notice her watching me from the passenger seat.

I know this is bad, she says, *but how did you get the scar above your eye?*

It's the sort of question that would've once sent me into despair—*you know this story,* I might have pleaded, *you were right there*—but I'm so used to them now, I hardly flinch.

That time in Kmart, I say.

That's right, she says. She turns away from me, looks out the window instead. *That's right.*

*

We still call my mother's childhood home *the farm*, though it stopped functioning as one around the time she left for college, and my grandfather, the farmer, is long gone. Built on 150 acres for my mother's family in 1954, the rooms of the two-story ranch house transformed over the years: the plush, goldenrod carpet in the sitting room where my grandfather died ripped up and replaced by hardwood; the single, elongated bathroom split in two—the one off the hallway still featuring the original blue bathtub, which I'd violently refused, at age four, to use after that first *Jaws* screening with my family. On the side of the house, up went a slatted grey deck and an above-ground pool that reached four feet at most, where I was baptized during a family reunion.

My mother and I moved to the farm when I was eight years old, a year after my father died; we left my sister behind with M. By then, the house was home to my uncle and grandmother, a precariously codependent pair. My uncle had returned to convalesce; he was diagnosed with HIV in 1989, the same year my mother found herself pregnant with me. Like her son, my grandmother was prone to violent mood swings, by which I mean that with them I experienced both joy and terror. A *private: knock first* sign taped to my bedroom door erupted into screams about ownership and my inherent narcissism. A request for waffles resulted in sugar poured on my plate. Any fight, any blue mood, eventually expressed with an informal death wish. But a minute later, perhaps an hour, everyone well and all forgotten.

Regardless of the family theatrics, I found the farm itself consoling. After the bus dropped me off at the top of the gravel drive, I'd race my Dalmatian through empty fields and scramble atop rounded hay bales, throw myself in the pool to drown ticks. When he drank just enough to be

happy, my uncle threw dinner parties for the widows in the area and instructed me on waiting tables. My grandmother attended my school events and was the first to break into applause. I missed my father, but leaving the home we'd lived in together dulled the missing. For my sister, I checked out a book about sharks from the library and attempted to re-type the entire thing, a project quickly abandoned. I wrote stories about a girl who moves from the city to the country, becomes someone else.

*

My sister's relationship with my mother has always looked different than mine, simultaneously more and less intimate. At first, I attributed this to their six years together before I arrived; they would always have that time, just the two of them. In the early years, when my mother and I drove to the farm, just the two of us, she often recounted making the same drive with my sister. I would imagine my sister sitting where I was in the passenger seat, singing along to the radio, making my mother laugh in ways I never could. I was always the more serious child; my sister possessed a levity that made me envy, even then, people who made laughter-making seem natural.

It felt tragic that my mother and sister had existed for so long without me, without even considering the possibility of my being, when my own life was predicated on their being. They didn't have to share each other. There was my sister's father, of course, the split child custody, but when my mother and sister were alone together, I imagined it as a sort of oasis in which no

one else mattered. If it was just my mother and me, someone was missing.

*

Already, my first mistake. By *early years*, I mean before my sister left to live with M, when I was five and she eleven. Surely I hadn't graduated to the passenger seat by then, was still sitting in the back, peering at my mother's face in the rearview mirror. But this is how I remember those drives: sitting to her right, propelling through space side by side.

*

My mother and I lived with my grandmother and uncle for only nine months, our sudden departure instigated by a bucket of water aimed at my mother's head. In the end, I was the farm's most temporary resident, and also the most reluctant to let it go.

*

The plan was always to go back. It was a mantra we repeated to ourselves: *we'll go home, someday. Someday, we'll go home*. We repeated it for the eleven years we lived in the southernmost reaches of the state, where my mother was hired after nursing school, night shifts in the neonatal intensive care unit. The constant plan to leave, to return to the farm, meant that we purposefully avoided attachments. Or we naturally avoided attachments, and we used our

impending retreat as an excuse.

In the first iteration of the plan, my uncle would build a house for my mother and me, in the adjoining pasture dotted with hay bales. From my bedroom window, I could have looked out at the main house, its blue-grey siding, the sun beating down on the deck. An architect in his former life, my uncle got as far as sketching the plans; as an adult, I discovered them and learned his vision included a reading loft reached by spiral staircase.

My uncle died when I was fifteen—not at the farm like he'd hoped, but in the hospital where my mother worked, after being admitted on Thanksgiving. Our plan became simpler then: my mother and I would move into the original house with my grandmother. I'd attend college twenty miles away, come home on the weekends.

Who knows how long my grandmother had been forgetting without our noticing. When I helped her respond to condolences after my uncle's funeral, she would read each card repeatedly as if for the first time. She found numbers in the phonebook and called acquaintances she hadn't spoken to in years, told them odd stories about her dreams. More than once, she got lost driving home from the general store, three miles and two turns away.

Even after a doctor called it Alzheimer's, we thought we had time. She could manage at the farm alone, we decided, until I finished high school a semester early. We bought her a medical necklace, the type with a button she could press if she fell or got confused, no matter that it

would take at least thirty minutes for an ambulance to reach her. I arranged to graduate early and made quick work of severing the few ties I'd managed, despite myself, to create.

December came around, and with it an invisible diploma—but we didn't go anywhere. There was always a reason, or at least back then I believed there was. Something to do with living wills, health insurance stonewalls. I didn't understand yet that going home was something we just talked about, a mantra with no end.

*

I remember my sister least of all from these years. She was a teenager, then starting college. We saw her for holidays, usually with a boyfriend in tow.

My uncle's funeral was her first visit to the farm in years. In the morning, before the service, I watched as my grandmother flung her cup at my sister, angry about her low-cut shirt and meaning to ruin it, but her cup was empty. My sister laughed a careless laugh, said to me later *this is why I don't come here anymore*.

I got a pass, we both knew: my family pitied me because I had no father. It's also true, I think, that they blamed my sister for her absence from their lives. A choice that was never hers to make.

*

After I left school, I often made the four-hour drive to the farm by myself, passing time with my grandmother—waiting for college, for the long-planned move home, now a decade in the making. I slept in the den, where my uncle had spent most of his time; my grandmother slept in his old bedroom.

One night she left her bed and walked through the hallway, across the kitchen, and down the stairs to where I slept. She placed her hands on my shoulders and shook me awake, begging me to cut her throat. *Just kill me*, she pleaded. *Make it stop*.

I'd already found my grandfather dead in that house. I was five years old when I discovered his body slumped before the fireplace, and she didn't believe that something was wrong until she saw him for herself, and then she stood over his body and screamed until the paramedics arrived—finally, somehow, how long did we wait?—to take his body away.

My sister always said the farm wasn't the farm anymore after my grandfather died, but I was young: a child of its newest iteration, the era of my grandmother and uncle, the era of me. But that night as my grandmother screamed, I realized that the farm would never be the same. In her terror, my grandmother stripped away the last of the house's protective qualities, and I couldn't save her from her fear: I was too busy thinking *home*, thinking *gone*. I was too lost in grief.

II.

When I leave Missouri for Ohio, I ask my mother to drive the moving truck. The house I've rented, sight unseen, will be my fifteenth address in twenty-seven years: seven with my mother, eight on my own. She helped with every one of the moves: driving the truck, packing dishes, lifting what I couldn't. The two of us sometimes performed the labor on our own, once pausing on a staircase with a queen-sized mattress between us to cry-laugh about the scene we were making.

My mother refuses my request, sounding appalled that I would even ask: she acts as if she's never driven a moving truck in her life. I add the discrepancy to my list of evidence that something is wrong, a list she willfully ignores, and pay a friend two hundred dollars to make the trip while I follow in my car.

*

Somehow, my mother managed to hide any hint of dependence from me until I was nearly an adult. The first time I recall her asking for help was after she had a cyst between her shoulders drained and stitched; it had been there for as long as I could remember: a hard, marble-sized lump not far below her neck, and I couldn't understand why she'd decided to rid herself of it now. She called me into her bedroom and held a shirt to her bare chest, while I moaned and shuddered over tending the wound. It's true that I have trouble with wounds—I'd struggle, years later, to tend to my own stitched arm—but I wish I hadn't recoiled from her body in that

moment.

When I was twenty-two, I took a week away from my internship at a city magazine to help her after rotator cuff surgery. It was a last-minute thought: before I offered, she'd planned to recover alone. The surgery went longer than expected, and when I was finally called back to collect her, she'd barely emerged from anesthesia. The nurse left me to walk her to the bathroom and get her dressed. She was deadweight against my body, and I felt certain I would drop her; I couldn't believe they'd left me to this task alone. I sent frantic, accusing looks around the ward but no one returned them; what would they have done, I wondered, if my mother had shown up alone? At home in the dark, I wedged myself beneath her good arm and half-carried her inside, then left her propped in the recliner overnight, high on pain medication that kept in her a cloud for days.

I spent that week in my high school-era bedroom across the hall, reading Stephen King to drown out thoughts of my mother's vulnerability. When I helped her undress for the shower, I did so quickly, careful to avoid eye contact in the mirrored closet doors, wondering who would do this for in thirty years.

My main responsibility, though, was the animals. By then, my mother had something like six dogs and ten cats, all living indoors, besides the two shy chows who refused to come in. Fifteen years old now, the Dalmatian I used to race around the farm with had to be carried outside to pee. I knew my mother couldn't lift her anymore, so at the end of the week, I took my beloved dog to be euthanized. I thought I could make the dying as peaceful as possible, but I did it all

wrong; she lunged at the needle that bit into her skin.

I was so happy to leave that house when I did, so angry at my mother for all her need, and me the one to fill it.

*

In Ohio, my own memory flickers out. I try to copy down a sentence but get three words in and forget the rest. The birthday card I buy for my niece disappears; I have no memory of leaving the store, with or without the card. I try to explain to new friends and professors that this lack of recall isn't typical for me—*I'm not myself right now*, I say, frustrated again, almost to the point of tears, when I can't conjure a word from my once-easy reserve.

My doctor attributes the memory loss to lack of rest and prescribes sleeping pills that drag me further under, so I leave them in a drawer to expire. My therapist cites stress. She spends the first few months of our sessions convincing me to stay in my graduate program rather than leaving to be near my mother. Our old mantra—*we'll go home, someday; someday, we'll go home*—has turned itself on me.

The dwindling of my memory makes my mother's feel more urgent. I've been needling her to report her symptoms for over a year, citing less innocuous possibilities tied to memory loss—vitamin deficiency, depression, her childhood history of hydrocephalus—and I'm angrier each

time I have to ask, each time she acts in a way I don't recognize, so that our phone calls become tense and often end in my hanging up on her, then feeling that I've failed, yet again, at being her daughter.

Finally, she agrees to see a neurologist, the week of my twenty-seventh birthday. She is sullen and dismissive; she wants to prove nothing is wrong, bury the matter for good. I spend the weeks before the appointment convincing myself that twenty-seven is old enough to live without a mother.

*

Just weeks after her rotator cuff surgery, my mother called. She'd decided, apropos of nothing, to drive thirteen hours to her sister's in Rapid City. In fact, she was already on the road.

It was unlike her to make such significant, last-minute plans: she who was still saying, three years after I'd left for college, that she'd be going home soon—not to the farm, which was no longer ours, but at least to Williamsburg.

By yourself? I asked. *Isn't it a long way?* She'd always been a driver—had made me a driver, too—but our longest trip, a two-day journey to Tampa, had been together. Months after the fact, I still couldn't shake the image of her post-surgery, how much she'd relied on me during that claustrophobic week.

She was undeterred by the distance, and my concern. In the pictures she sent, posing on a wind-whipped hiking trail through the Black Hills, it was the happiest I'd seen her in years.

*

Realizing she might soon need a caretaker of her own, my great-aunt built a tin-roofed cabin in her backyard for my mother. In her eighties by then, my great-aunt had spent her life less than a mile from our farm, on the land where she and my grandfather were raised. She retired from raising cattle in her sixties, but she still overseas crops on the property. In a few years, her land will be recognized by the state as a centennial farm.

She never married or had children; my mother, who shares her name and several likenesses, became her de facto daughter.

For years after the contractors finished building, the cabin sat empty—naked walls, concrete floors smooth as nickel and cool to the touch. *She'd go home someday*, my mother said. *Someday, she'd go home*.

It took my announcement that I was leaving for Ohio to force the move into existence. *I won't be able to help you once I'm gone*, I said, though in truth I helped her hardly at all. I feared if she didn't move before I left, she'd never make it home. At least get her back to the land, I thought. Get her to her aunt's, where they could watch out for each other.

Of course, now my great-aunt is doing most of the watching. She's frightened for my mother, for herself. She wants to die where she was born; she doesn't want to outlive her niece. It doesn't seem like so much to ask.

*

On my first trip back from Ohio, the first visit with my mother in her new cabin, I stay with friends thirty miles down the interstate. My mother's place has only one bed; it's over-crowded with boxes and cats, unnecessarily remote. I hadn't known how excited she was for my visit: stocking up on popcorn and movies from Family Video, clearing a dresser drawer for me in her bedroom. She doesn't object until it's too late—my car already running for the drive back east when she screams at me that I don't love her, that no one has ever loved her, and in that moment she feels unlovable to me.

This isn't my home, I try to explain, but she can't understand.

My hands shake as I drive away, going faster than necessary across the gravel roads. I think of people who cleave away from their families, how reasonable—for the first time—that action seems.

III.

From the time I was eight to eighteen, the farm existed as my grieving place: after my father died, my uncle; after the dissolution of romantic relationships. I'd retreat to my island of solitude—poor cell phone reception, no internet, the only business in town closed by six—and dwell in my loss. Sometimes this looked like sitting at the kitchen table with my grandmother for ten hours a day, writing while she knit. Others, it looked like driving myself to the nearest pool, where I was usually the only guest. By the time I left, days or weeks later, I felt ready to exist in the world again.

When my pregnancy ended, seven months after I left high school, the farm wasn't ours anymore. It hadn't yet sold but I refused to go there, to grieve in a place we'd given up.

The doctor pointed to the motionless ultrasound, and I walked outside to the parking lot and folded into the ground. I could feel myself retreating, and it dawned on me then that my body was a house. I walked through it, room by room, drawing every curtain and locking every door. I plunged my house into darkness, and then I went inside of it for a long, long time.

*

The first neurology results are inconclusive enough to appease my mother yet hint at what I know is there. *Overall, the results indicate memory loss that's beyond the expectations of aging.* One line buried in a pages-long report. So easy to overlook.

My sister, too, takes convincing. I can't bring myself to say what I'm thinking for fear of hurting her: *of course you don't see it. You don't know her like I do.*

*

Only as an adult did I consider how it might have felt for my sister, moving apart from us when she was eleven years old. She seemed so old to me then, practically grown, but then I remember my girl-child self at that age, how lonely it could feel when my mother was in the next room, sleeping.

I lived with my mother as a teenager. I lived with her in close proximity, with no one else among us—no other bodies on our couch, no other voices over meals. We existed together in a way the two of them never did.

Now, my sister is my mother's nearest daughter. Sometimes I don't realize they're together until one of them thinks to send pictures, and I'm always relieved and a little jealous to learn they're back in their oasis—an altered one this time, with room for my sister's daughters, and me always on the periphery, the distant daughter who refuses to come home.

*

Toward the end of our brief marriage, S and I nearly bought a house. We chose wrongly from the

final two, which was mostly my doing. I seemed to call all the shots back then, though none of the shots were altogether appealing, just there for the calling. The second house had so much character: retro wallpaper, a converted garage we could have turned into a screened-in porch, a quiet tree-lined street where we could have known our neighbors. The house we chose was the easy one: brand new, nothing to renovate or make our own. White walls, cream carpet, immaculate floorboards. Built on such an extreme incline, we would have worn out our emergency brakes.

Nothing seemed permanent until then—not the marriage certificate, the apartment we shared, certainly not the abbreviated pregnancy—but the house was real. Something physical we would have to deal with in a divorce, maybe a place I wouldn't be able to leave.

Already in escrow, I told him to undo it, and then I went about undoing the rest.

*

After a year in Ohio, I move again, from a cavernous three-story house to a one-bedroom apartment. My mother drives from Missouri to help me pack and I assign her to the kitchen, first moving my roommates' things inside closed drawers and cabinets, leaving only mine exposed and ready to pack away. Still, when we get to my apartment, I find my roommates' dishes mixed with mine, her tinfoil tucked away in the third drawer. *I told you*, I said to my mother. *You should have taped the drawers shut*, she said.

Midway through the week, she asks me to drive her the ninety minutes to Dayton. Her cousin is retiring from the military base there; she's promised to attend.

I refuse to drive her. I blame how much work there is still to be done, but mostly I can't tolerate her fear. It's been only five years since her spontaneous trip to Rapid City; she's just driven five hundred miles to Ohio.

That was straight down I-70, she pleaded. *I don't know the roads here.*

Still, I refuse. She drives herself without incident, while I haul as much as I can on my own: down two flights of stairs, up another three.

*

My new apartment requires more of me than any other. I build a bookshelf that fits behind the couch, the only space for one, out of long planks and cinder blocks I haul up the stairs. The walls are concrete, so I must get creative—or use force—to hang things: photos of my mother and me, forty years apart, standing in the same spot at the farm; a painting of a saint my uncle made in Portugal. I buy a stud sensor that will supposedly alert me of electrical wires, but it signals danger everywhere I place it, so I hold my mother's drill against the wall and hope for the best.

I don't call her with questions. Instead, I become obsessed with self-sufficiency, sometimes to

the point of foolishness: in the fall, I pull my air conditioning unit from the window and nearly drop it on someone below, rather than ask a friend to help me. Months later I drive to urgent care, alarmed by a pain in my chest but unwilling to relay the symptoms to my mother, and leave with a diagnosis of heartburn.

My mother, too, calls less and less, so I follow her activities through tagged photos on Facebook. I can't be sure if she forgets to tell me about her daily life, or if she's forgotten that I'm someone she used to talk to every day.

*

My mother has always confessed to not longing for motherhood, but she paid for the houses in which I lived, the food I ate, the clothes I wore. When needed, there were others around to dress me, fix meals, press cool hands to warm forehead.

Over the years, my extra caretakers died off, one by one, when I was seven and then fifteen and then twenty-five, so you could say this is why I feel so vulnerable, like an animal with a dwindling pack, made to survive on its own. *You're an adult*, I remind myself, but then I overhear a woman my age on the phone asking her mother for advice and I think *oh*, I think *I miss that*, I think *that's how humans survive.*

*

One night, exhausted after rearranging furniture, I lie in bed and think of the farm. It's an infrequent allowance; spending too much time there in my memory—walking down the hallway, tracing my fingers along the walls, listening for the sounds of my family—it feels dangerous, too close to an impossible longing.

Mostly, I think of the months after losing the farm, how deeply I spiraled, untethered from the place that anchored me. It dawns on me then, how that untethering was merely a preview of losing my mother, the only person who anchors me. The most consistent presence in my life, vanishing.

*

On her first trip outside the country, my mother and I went to Nassau together. I was twenty-two; she was fifty-four, still herself. I booked the travel with her credit card, and when we opened the door to our hotel room, she audibly gasped: the ocean lay just past our veranda, as if it were an extension of our space.

One afternoon midway through the trip, we joined a small tour boat going out to sea. I refused to go snorkeling, citing my fear of sharks, but my mother donned the flippers and mask and slid easily into the water. She floated around for an hour, her body suspended on the surface, the sun warming her back.

She was so content out there, alone. It never dawned on me to fear for her.

IV.

The second round of neurology tests, a year out from the first, are equally inconclusive, but there are new phrases that my sister and I pass back and forth—*arachnoid cyst*, *white matter*, *ischemic changes*—tacking on the knowledge we've gathered from the internet, opposing facts that lead to more questions than answers. Mostly, we speak of her changing personality.

My mother worked in the NICU for fifteen years, monitoring the most minute changes in vitals, measuring impossibly small doses into impossibly small intravenous tubes, changing palm-sized diapers without disturbing ventilators. At home, she mowed our acre of land with a push-mower, jumped my battery every time I let my car die, rehabilitated baby squirrels knocked from nests, renovated my bedroom, managed my grandmother's finances from afar, worked extra shifts to fund extravagant prom gowns, hung every piece of art on my walls until I was twenty-six.

Now, she's more often than not confused, frightened, dubious of herself. On days she's reluctant to accept the neurological issues as reality, she thinks she's always been this way.

*

On my last trip to Missouri, I stayed at my sister's rather than a friend's. This arrangement suits my mother, who can visit all of us at once. Normally I sleep in my nieces' bedroom, but my sister had moved the girls' bunkbeds to her own bedroom, in the hopes that they would finally start sleeping in their own beds. It was a failed attempt.

At night, I climbed to the top bunk and looked down at my sister's bed, the three of them curled together, whispering to each other in the dark.

We didn't grow up together, or wind up alike, my sister and me—but what a relief, I think now: what a relief to not go through this alone.

*

Why didn't we go home? I finally ask my mother. I want to make sense of it. I need to know why she hesitated if I'm ever going to understand my own hesitations.

She talks in circles for a while, citing the same innocuous reasons she gave for years. None of it feels satisfying, so I keep pushing. *Was it about your mother?* I say. *Did you resent taking care of her?*

But my mother points in a direction I never considered. *The women at work*, she says. *We were a family.*

I don't begrudge my mother this other family. I'm too relieved to know she was holding on to something new, something all her own.

*

On quiet evenings in my apartment—bored, or feeling guilty—I open my laptop and browse houses for sale near my mother and sister. I can't imagine a future in which I'll own a home; the idea of being responsible for something as unpredictable as a stove feels beyond my capabilities.

Of course, that doesn't impede my fantasies. I walk through my neighborhood and stare at the Victorian houses, too large for my purposes but striking in their elaborateness: castle-like turrets, layers of trim painted in corresponding pallets, the occasional stone beast guarding its property. I identify my favorite house in the city—a simple colonial style with hydrangea bushes overtaking the yard—and slow each time I pass it.

My want is less for ownership than permanence: to be able to say *I live here* and mean indefinitely.

If I were to follow the natural progression of things, I'd abandon my apartment within a year. Already, the thought depresses me. I've settled here; it suits me. When friends visit, they comment on it: how the space feels like mine, or an extension of me.

What if I stayed here forever? I start fantasizing about the possibility. People do this, I know: they pick a place and settle in. What if this were my home? How easy would it be to make it so?

To make a home here, I fear, will send a message to my mother. Maybe the message—that I won't come back for her, that I'll choose my life instead—will even be true.

It's an unbearable thought, and yet.

Chapter 4: Rules for Vanishing

To introduce us to evaporation, my teacher placed a glass of water inside a closet. For weeks, maybe months, she would open the door and we would peer in at the glass, perched there on a stool, and observe the water level, trying to determine if any had disappeared. My classmates lost interest before long, but I could think of little else. On days my teacher didn't open the door, I begged her to let me look. I wanted to sit before the glass and watch the water disappear; I needed to see it to believe it was happening.

Once I believed—most of the water irrefutably gone—I decided that evaporation only occurs to that which is left alone.

*

My mother has a pair of matching tattoos: a green-stemmed red rose on her ankle, the other on her breast. They're from the days before my sister and I existed. This version of my mother is a stranger to me: tight leather pants, permed hair, stilettos that announced her arrival. She followed her first husband into a tattoo studio one day and he asked her to get the set, so she did.

The roses are faded now; her first husband, my sister's father, three years dead.

When I was eighteen, I paid someone to tattoo a dime-sized heart on my wrist. I can't remember if my partner at the time asked me to do it—an echo of the word *love* on his own wrist—or if I volunteered.

The size of the heart made it easy to cover up two years later.

*

In the syllabus I hand to my students, I include a quote from Simone de Beauvoir: "It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being."

We spend the semester talking about rhetoric through the lens of singlehood. I play clips from *Bridget Jones*, *Insecure*, *Queer Eye.* We question the romantic motivations in video games, the tonal distinctions between "spinster" and "bachelor," the differences between being alone and being lonely. Inevitably, someone writes their final paper on the oeuvre of Taylor Swift.

Some are more skeptical of the topic than others. One student in particular, a young woman who quickly identifies herself as a feminist, challenges me from her seat in the back row. She feels I am devaluing marriage. I think of myself at her age: engaged, sleeping in my car between classes to avoid the students who stared openly at my ring.

That's not my intention, I assure her. *The point is to value the options.*

*

My mother dated one man after she and my father divorced, and a second after my father died. I registered my displeasure with both men implacably and gleefully.

I've since expressed guilt over my selfishness, but she always waves it away. *I was in a cycle*, she says. *The next man I found would've been like your sister's father.* By which she means, a man who insists on control.

As her last daughter to leave the house, I feel responsible for my mother's aloneness. I used to wish that she would marry again, a gentle man this time, both for her own sake and so I might be reminded what it feels like to have a father, even the semblance of one.

Now, I'm grateful my mother refused to give herself over again. That I got to know her as she is—as she was, before the forgetting began.

*

I didn't try to sell my wedding ring for months. It seemed like a relic I should keep, something I could put in a drawer and return to only when I wanted, unlike the tattoo on my wrist. When I finally became desperate enough to pay my bills, I made the circuit of pawn shops in the college town where I was studying under my maiden name.

I pretended I was selling the ring for my sister and was surprised when no one would take it. The diamond was cloudy, they said, scratched. The white gold band wasn't gold after all. One woman invited me to lean over the monocular as she pointed out the flaws in the design.

I didn't see it, I said. She looked at me over the monocular, the ring still in her hand. *No*, she said. *Of course you didn't.*

*

Every so often, I imagine myself pregnant, just to see how it feels.

In the years after the miscarriage, I embodied this pregnant self, looking down at my protruding belly, placing my hands on the most outward point.

Now, I look at a pregnant version of myself from several feet away. Her hair is pulled up and she's wearing a long, collared shirt, or maybe a collared dress—there's always a collar (I model my pregnant self, I've realized, off Diane Keaton in the second *Father of the Bride*). My pregnant self looks content, adult. She's usually standing in a well-lit room and reading a list.

If I stay long enough, her face begins to resemble someone else, just like I knew it would.

*

Of the time after her late-term miscarriage, Seema Reza writes, “I experienced a loneliness I had never before noticed. A sense of being alone in my body.”

*

Had my pregnancy ended with the birth of a living girl—I have this much information, at least, from the chromosome tests—my grandmother would have met my daughter before she died, well before her Alzheimer’s reached its worst. She would’ve remembered my daughter between visits, delighted in her mundane movements, delighted in seeing me as a mother.

Had my pregnancy ended with the birth of a living girl, that girl would have known my mother, well before my mother’s personality began to shift as the vessels in her brain started to shrink.

If I cannot offer another daughter these things, why create her at all?

*

Before I was a fully grown child, I stayed home with my father while my mother went to work, my sister to school. The mornings were for children’s programming, but the afternoons were for his own interests. More than once he put on the film *Amadeus*, of which I remember only the young composer’s pink-tinted wig, which I deeply admired, and a scene of him in bed with a woman. He stretched out on his back and the woman curled into his side, tucked her head

beneath his arm and pressed her nose to his ribs. I was struck by the intimacy and awkwardness of the arrangement. Already, I recognized my separateness from other bodies—cultivated that separateness, even.

In bed that night, my sister asleep in the bunk above mine, I moved the pillow to my side and draped my arm across it. Immediately, I understood the comfort that could derive from resting against something, someone. I've slept that way for most of my life.

*

The first conversation I recall during which my father told me he would die, I corrected him. It seemed obvious to me that my mother would die first, as she was five years older.

No, he said. *I'll die first because I'm sick. But your mother will live for a long, long time.*

*

My therapist asks what's changed, from the post-miscarriage version of myself desperate to create a family, to the most recent version who cannot envision being a mother.

I don't have a satisfying answer for either of us. I know there's another form of me out there, the one who, since she was a small child, was complimented on her maternal instincts, but I can't access her now, nor do I want to.

Instead, I remember looking at myself in the mirror after only a handful of hours alone with my youngest niece, distraught and howling in my arms—and when I locked eyes with my reflection, already I couldn't recognize myself.

It takes no time at all for me to surrender myself to another. It takes no time for me to disappear.

*

In a diary entry, Virginia Woolf writes of her lost desire to have children: "And perhaps I have killed the feeling instinctively; as perhaps nature does."

*

At twenty-four, I sat in a quiet room watching my mother watch her mother die. She stood at the head of the bed and spoke to my grandmother as if she were awake, as if she could hear her. Maybe she could.

My mother has two sisters but they were at home with their husbands; my sister was at home with her husband and daughter. Occasionally, a nurse came in to check my grandmother's vitals, but for the most part it was just us three.

The death process had stretched on for days. The night before, I slept on the floor and tried not to think about how my grandmother's dying sounds were so similar to my dog's. After breakfast, which a nurse delivered on mauve, plastic trays, I left to go back to my life. I didn't believe my grandmother would die that day, and she didn't. It wasn't until the next afternoon, but I didn't return. I left my mother to lose her mother, alone.

*

When I began to realize I might not want to have children, midway through my twenties, I started asking the childless women in my life if they could think of one unselfish reason to have a baby. I wanted them to have an answer, to think of something I hadn't. The only satisfying answer I got—and even then, only partly—was to give your only child a sibling.

It's true that I judged my sister when she got pregnant for the second time, shortly after her father died. It seemed like an escape hatch from her grief: she could disappear into the rhythms and exhaustions of growing a body inside of hers, rather than acknowledging her loss.

In the postscript of Kate Zambreno's *Book of Mutter*, which centers around her mother's death, Zambreno reveals that she realized, while finishing the book, that she was pregnant. She later gave birth to a girl.

How often is my judgment rooted in envy?

*

Because my father was my primary caregiver—because after he died, my mother was a full-time nursing student, then a night nurse—it's difficult to recall specific moments with her. Mostly, I remember long stretches of being alone.

But still, she's there. I know she is. She permeates every memory I have: even when she wasn't physically close, I always knew where she was. I could reach her, if I needed to.

We cannot know how this will go. She could live for ten years and remember me for all of them, though not our conversations in between; she could live for two years and forget me by the end. She could die tomorrow, remembering me. Any mother could. We're all on the verge of disappearing.

Still, part of me hopes that if I don't look away, she can't go.

*

My husband used to laugh at how I pronounced my new surname: what emerged as one syllable from his own mouth stretched into two from mine. There's something unsettling about being unable to pronounce one's own name. I said it as infrequently as possible.

*

In conversation with Rivka Galchen, the novelist Claire Messud discussed ways in which motherhood opened both her life and her work. Galchen read a list of famous authors along with their number of offspring and number of published books (Messud has two children and six books; Galchen, one and three).

I didn't copy down Messud's exact words. I'm too accustomed to hearing them, and too resentful of their implications.

Of course, I want to live in a world where women writers with children are respected as much as their male counterparts. I want to talk about divisions of household labor and childcare. And I concede that giving birth must be a life-altering experience, in part because my life was altered by a pregnancy that lasted eleven weeks.

But I also want to resist the notion of motherhood as the actualization of womanhood. I want to assert that my work can still open, even if I never literally create life.

*

Had my pregnancy ended with the birth of a living girl, I might not have traveled to Greece, England, Ireland. Maybe not even Manhattan, Toronto, Savannah.

Had my pregnancy ended with the birth of a living girl, I would never have learned how much I love to live alone. It's possible, though unlikely, that I would still be married. It's possible I would have more children.

Had my pregnancy ended with the birth of a living girl, my mother would still forget the stories I tell her, the date I was born—perhaps, eventually, the curves of my face. But when she died, if my girl lived, I might still feel tethered to this earth.

*

Sarah Manguso, on motherhood: "My body, my life, became the landscape of my son's life. I am no longer merely a living thing in the world; I am a world."

*

I can recall, step by step, the moments between my aunt getting the phone call that summoned us to the hospital and my mother appearing from behind the curtain that hid my father's body. After that, the gaps settle in.

When writing about that day, I recreated the moment of my mother and I leaving for home: *We left the hospital without him, walking, I imagine, hand in hand, gasping when the doors slide open to release us, shocked by the force of air.*

Only recently did I learn that I'd imagined wrong. Evidently, my mother's friend picked me up from the hospital and took me back to her apartment. She gave me her four-poster bed, which I loved, and slept on the couch. Her cat stayed with me all night.

It's over twenty years later when this memory is corrected; I'm two years shy of thirty and see my mother three or four times a year. Still, I feel unmoored to learn she sent me away in that moment, that I survived without her. Was made to survive without her.

*

When my married friend visits the apartment where I live by myself, she says *I wish I lived here.* What I really hear her say, perhaps because I'm listening for it: *I wish I'd stayed on my own.*

*

My mother's become more concerned with my singlehood in the past year. She had hoped I would marry my last partner, who still texts her on British Mother's Day, video chats with my nieces from his home in the UK.

I'm unsure if her interest is attributed to my age or her health. I ask my sister why she's so concerned, and my sister responds, as she often does, from the place of a mother. *I would want to know my daughters were okay, too*.

*

I thought I would marry my last partner, once. How to explain, then, that sometime during those three years, I started to hunger for myself?

*

Had my pregnancy ended with the birth of a living girl, surely the timing of my sister's pregnancies would have changed.

I could never choose my imaginary girl over this pair of sisters, the way they fit into each other's arms, the way they scream, their lung sounds vibrating the air around them until everything comes alive. They throw their bodies onto mine and I feel the weight of them, their warm skin, their inconceivable, pounding hearts.

*

Years ago, before the forgetting, I was sure my mother would someday move in with me. I expected this to happen in my forties. I expected her to be healthy—to help with my children, perhaps the research for my writing projects.

Now, I live five hundred miles away. My sister has an alert on her phone for properties with mother-in-law suites; they would have to make the investment together. She wants me to help make sure everything's fair.

I'm both relieved to be freed of the responsibility and compelled to join them—to stick this out together.

Another part of me wants to live wherever I choose to live. To not go down with the ship.

*

According to the last census, there are 2.4 million Smiths in the U.S. If I were to marry again, I feel certain, I would keep my last name, though for years I resented the commonality of it.

Of my family line, there are three Smiths—by name—left: my great-aunt, my mother, me.

When my great-aunt hangs up the phone after our calls, she says *so long*.

Her sister, another great-aunt, was not a Smith when she died. She took her husband's name. For decades, her husband had a second family, though they weren't listed as such in his obituary.

My great-aunt, unmarried and childless for eighty-one years, can't believe she's still here. *Threescore and ten is enough*, she tells me. Her body is failing, part by part, but her mind is still present.

When she speaks of my mother, her evaporating mind, she cries.

It's unsurprising to me that my great-aunt has yet to disappear. *So long* she says, when I leave her.

*

As if missing the sinking means I won't still drown.

*

At the end of last year, my sister was expected for Christmas dinner with her paternal family. Traditionally I spend those hours with my mother, but she left early, so for the first time, I joined for dinner. It felt like practice for a future I don't want but must consider anyway.

When we walked through the door, I knew I'd made a mistake. There were so many of them, my sister's relatives; they stared at me, most of them unsure who I was. We don't belong to each other.

My older niece, four years old at the time, loves to visit her family. She'd been anticipating this moment for hours. I expected her to bound forward into the crowd, show off her velvet dress, her new doll.

Instead, she slowed down, matched the hesitancy of my steps. My sister's girl—she reached for me, led me inside.

Chapter 5: Eclipsed

One morning, a month shy of my twenty-eighth birthday, I wake and go to the mirror, and a woman who is me but not quite me looks back.

Her hair is more auburn than mine, suspended in curls, rather than waves. I reach up to touch my chin; it comes to a sharper point than I expect. My eyes used to resemble my sister's in their circuity—yellow ringed by green ringed by blue—but now they're a soft grey. They look tired, curious.

"You're Kathy," I say. Our voices are nearly identical, so I try instead, "I'm Kathy."

I know I should be disturbed by this development, but I feel calm. I am Kathy. We are Kathy. We are not me anymore. We are my aunt, dead at twenty-seven. We are both alive, both not.

I'm supposed to teach today, but my students would likely be confused by us—just enough to be distracted, not enough to ask who we are—so I email them to say class is cancelled. I don't write *indefinitely*, though I wonder.

My cat is stretched across the radiator to my left. We look at each other. “I’m Kathy,” I say to her. She yawns, unimpressed.

I consider making a cup of tea, but I don’t know if Kathy drinks tea or coffee. I know nothing of her preferences, next to nothing about her personality, her background, what she did before she married, had a son. What she did before she died. I assume she graduated high school, but did she go to college? How old was she on her wedding day?

I was eleven months old when she died. She was—we are—the sister of my estranged birth father. We are twenty-seven now. For both of us, this is the oldest we’ve ever been.

“So, this is our apartment,” I say. I’m standing in the square foot between the kitchen and the living room. From here, we can see everything: the bookshelf behind the couch, which I assembled out of long, wooden planks and spray-painted cinder blocks; the kitchen table from the farm, its surface scratched and burned; my bedroom, where I sleep alone. I wonder if Kathy ever lived by herself. If she was the type of person who needed to.

Kathy gravitates to the kitchen table. There’s a stack of seven envelopes, smaller than postcards, propped against a coffee mug full of pens. The stamps are mostly bird designs, twenty-five cents apiece. Inside, each letter is dated between the months of January and October 1990.

“I’ve been reading them a lot lately,” I say. “It’s all I have of yours.”

That, and the resemblance. Last January, I saw Kathy's widower, Mark, for the first time since I was a small child. He couldn't stop staring. Over lunch, each time I laughed, he would shake his head and look down at his hands. Finally, he asked if he could take a picture of me to send to his parents.

"They won't believe how much you look like her," he said.

Now that I am Kathy, I know this to be a bit of a stretch. Her hips are wider than mine, legs longer. Her teeth feel taller when I run our tongue across them, and our jaw doesn't click when I open it. Still, I have to admit that ours is the closest resemblance of my known relatives. I have often lost myself in family photo albums—only of my mother's family, I know little of my birth father's—looking for someone I look like. Occasionally, I think I've found one: a great-grandmother with a brooding expression, perhaps. But then my mother looks over my shoulder and says, "Your sister looks like exactly her." And I look nothing like my sister, so I know.

Kathy is still fidgeting with the letters, so I offer to read them. We start at the beginning: January 8, my mother living alone with my five-year-old sister and hugely pregnant with me.

J only told Mom around a month ago. She reacted the same way I did at first. We both felt very sorry for you and were unhappy with J, but who are we to decide what is right and wrong. What we both want to do is be close to you and the new little sweet thing.

"That's us," I say. We are the new little sweet thing. We are the adored, and the adorer.

I know a thing or two about accidental babies; they are not universally adored.

"Jonathan Ross called me a bastard," I tell Kathy. "On the playground in third grade." The hot heat shame of it. Still, I flinch when a visiting writer at my university makes a joke about his character's bastard children.

Kathy reaches for the other letters. March 7: *Just wanted to write a note to say thanks for letting us come up and visit with Eliza.*

"Did he come with you?" I ask. On a scrap of paper, I've recorded the ten times I've encountered my birth father. I assigned him a single visit during my infancy, but maybe I was wrong.

Sometime between March 7 and April 24: *We are going to start family counseling with Mom, J, and myself. Our first session is Friday. This is a major step for us all. I guess mostly what we could get out of it is making J decide to go to a chemical dependency place. But first we have a lot to work through.*

Counseling, rehab—how might that have turned out if the other thread wasn't simultaneously unspooling?

Finally got our tax returns done and sent off. We should get back quite a bit of money. With all our medical expenses we had a lot spent, so maybe we will come out even.

We are tired. I am used to feeling tired, but now I feel doubly so. We set the envelopes aside, curl up into the couch and fall asleep with our knees pressed against the back cushions.

*

The man I'm seeing arrives at half past five with a light knock on the door. It's Tuesday, the day we watch movies and read together—separate books of course, but simultaneously—and I've forgotten to tell him that I'm Kathy. I go to the door, talk through it.

"Something weird happened," I say.

"Okay," he says.

"I'm not myself," I say.

"That's okay," he says. And then, "Do you want me to go?"

I pull the door open, hard—it's an old building, things have settled in—and the man I'm seeing looks down at me. His head tilts slightly to the left, or maybe I'm imagining it.

“Is this her?” he says.

I nod. “We’re her.”

The man I’m seeing knows I’ve been obsessed with Kathy lately. I’ll turn twenty-eight in a few weeks, and the eclipse will pass. I will be older than she ever was, look older than we ever did. I’m not sure why this matters, but of late it’s the only thing that does.

“How much do you know about her?” the man I’m seeing asks. We’ve moved to the couch, the three of us. Normally I would arrange myself close to him, but I want to give Kathy her space.

I try to list what I know, but it comes out as an inventory of things I don’t: if her name is short for Katherine; what her middle name might be; if she was the older or younger sibling of the two; if she had the same father as my birth father; how exactly she died; if she would have had other children, after her son; if she would have kept me tethered to my paternal family, like her letters imply, or drifted away; if she would have talked my birth father into dealing with his addiction; if the lack of her death might have changed how deeply he spiraled.

“But I know what she looks like now,” I say. Before, I’d seen only one picture: we’re at the skating rink for my half-sister’s birthday, J’s other daughter. I must be nine or ten months old. Kathy’s holding me on her lap and laughing. Her son and mother lean in to her, both beaming. She doesn’t look sick at all, though she’ll die soon.

"You do look alike," the man I'm seeing says. "Not identical, but you can tell you're related."

"Thank you," we say. "Would you like to read one of our letters?"

The man agrees, so we hand him an envelope and lean back, close our eyes. The man reads.

September 14, 1990

Dear Barb and girls,

How is KC? Mexico is driving me crazy with boredom. I can't drive or lift over five lbs. You know I am following that to the T. Ha!

We are bound for Boston Oct. 15th for the harvest of my bone marrow. After that we come home and wait for a bed on the bone marrow unit to open. It should be November when we go.

I haven't seen Mom but once since I've been home from the hospital. She doesn't come around much, I think her husband has something to do with that. He won't let her take me to the doctor's because it's putting too many miles on his car. Actually it doesn't matter to me just as long as she is happy.

Here is our address while we are in Boston. I'll be at the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit. I sure would like to hear news from everyone while I am there.

Love Always,

Kathy

The man folds the letter away, carefully. "Do you think she likes Thai food?" he asks.

"Surely."

We order from our usual place. We get a little bit of everything this time, just to be safe. Later, we fall asleep on our backs holding hands. The ceiling looks farther away than usual, or maybe it's the floor that seems closer.

*

Two weeks pass, and I'm still Kathy. I leave my apartment only for walks around the block. It feels impossible to explain to my friends, my students, what's happened. First, I would have to justify my obsession, which seems contradictory to the function of an obsession.

And then, too, the hierarchy of grief. I know the hierarchy well, well enough to understand that the half-sister of your estranged birth father who died when you were eleven months old is low

enough to perhaps not warrant a position in the hierarchy at all.

But look how much I look like her! I might say. *Look at us. At me.*

My mother calls and I don't mention I'm Kathy. Instead, we talk about the wild kittens my mother's taken in. One of them has pneumonia; my mother puts her in an empty fish tank four times a day for her breathing treatments. The routine reminds her of her neonatal patients.

What I really want to know is if I'll wake someday as my mother. If so, I imagine the day won't come until I'm in my sixties, almost older than she's ever been. I'm guessing, of course—assuming her death, assuming it will happen before mine—but at the rate the veins in her brain are shrinking, we'll be lucky, I think, to make it another decade.

If I wake as my mother, with my mother's missing memory, will I remember that I'm not who I appear to be? Will I lose myself in her, till the end?

I like the circularity of this ending almost enough to wish for it.

*

I refuse to read the last letter. I fear if we read it, I'll wake up as myself.

We walk circles around my apartment. Kathy's impatient, but she doesn't push me. At night, she takes the envelope and slips it under our pillow, as if she'll be able to absorb it.

On the sixteenth day, we learn that Kathy's replacement—her son's stepmother—has died. Cancer, sixty-eight, so quick the second time around. Neither of us can sit with the unfairness of it.

Without reading it first, I put the last of Kathy's letters inside a larger envelope and overnight it five hundred miles to my cousin's home. His first mother's handwriting is the only comfort I can think of to offer him.

That night, we can't sleep—but to my relief, she stays.

*

I call my mother and ask her to tell my relatives hello for me at the funeral. She's forgotten about the funeral, but she gets there in time to catch my grandmother, Kathy's mother, and invite her to lunch.

Afterward, I call to hear what she's learned. (In the past, she would have delivered this directly to me, but now she forgets what she hasn't told me, what I might want to know.)

Evidently my grandmother is living with J now, to keep him alive. He keeps driving while intoxicated, coming close to overdosing when left alone. And the newest diagnosis: alcohol-induced dementia, they're calling it.

I don't say what I'm thinking from Kathy's mouth, but I imagine she hears the thought.

*

Three days before my birthday, a package arrives from my mother. I assume it's a gift and open it before the door's shut behind us. Inside, two manila folders, holding court documents and receipts of child support payments that J made to my mother over the course of four years—the only time, I assume, that he had the sort of job where child support was automatically deducted from his checks.

Beneath it all, two letters. They're typed on the same piece of paper in two different fonts, so my mother must have transcribed them herself. She's always been so careful not to lose anything.

Kathy and I move to the couch, read the first letter.

What I'm trying to say is that this is really uncomfortable for me, because in a way you kinda neglected me for 13 years and when I talk about my dad, I mean the man who died 6 years ago. Could you just start by explaining why you're a father to your other kids, but I somehow always

got left out? I'm pretty sure you don't deny I'm your daughter by blood. My sister thinks that if a person lies to themself long enough, they start to believe their lies, so maybe in your world I don't exist.

I just need a little closure here, I don't care what the truth is as long as it's honest, I'm tired of growing up with lies. Thanks for trying.

I remember the gist of the second letter and don't want to read it, but Kathy's eyes are already moving across the lines, and I can hear the words in my head—in her voice or mine, I'm not sure.

Eliza,

Talking to you, after the last letter you sent I find difficult. After getting your first letter I was thankful and overjoyed, because you finally reached out to me without outside interference. After getting the next letter I hear the hostility, anger, unhappyness, this bothers me a great deal. This is why it bothers me so much, my wife Tonya has been very hostile and angry also, we were married aug. 15 02, and were together 5 weeks when she found herself someplace else to live. Then right before Christmas we got back together until mar. 20 03. The 4 months we spent together out of the last year and three months was a living Hell with this hostility and anger.

I also found that nothing I said made any difference, this I also fear with you, nothing I would say will take away that pain from you.

I never knew if and when you knew about me so I lived in darkness not knowing much of anything about you. Something else is that my father left also, but I never wanted to see him, thus thinking you would not want to see me so you can see how happy I was with the first letter.

I am sorry you lost your father that you loved and loved you. I do know a little about how that feels.

Sorry this is short, hopefully in the future this will go much better

J

And I don't know why, except that I am my father's daughter: I hide the folders away where I don't have to see them and drink glass after glass of wine until I forget who I am, until I forget my mother's shrinking veins, until I stop wondering which of my parents will forget me first.

*

On the night before my twenty-eighth birthday, I invite two of my closest friends to my apartment.

“So this is where you’ve been,” one says.

“This is fucking awesome,” the other says.

“I just wanted you to meet her, before she goes,” I say.

We open a bottle of champagne, the one that’s been sitting idly in my refrigerator for months. We drink to Kathy, to ourselves for cheating death another year. We talk about our fathers, four of them between us: estranged, dead, estranged, distant. We talk about our mothers: dead, dying, far away.

“I don’t know if I’ll go to his funeral,” I say. I look at Kathy in the reflection of my glass, turn our head from left to right. “Is it terrible to say I wish he’d died instead?”

But I know as soon as I say it out loud: at least once, if not consistently, he’s wished the same.

That night, the last of the eclipse, we pull the covers over our head and sleep so deeply I think we’re dead. We sleep so deeply and for so long that when I wake in the morning, twenty-eight and alone again, I’m surprised to be alive.

Chapter 6: Somewhere, LA

I hope this finds you well. Or I hope this finds you at all. I can only imagine you're still in Los Angeles. All those years you could hear the city's siren call in your sleep.

*

Do you remember the Christmas you buried my dog? I was home alone, and when I woke to Charlie's too-fast breaths outside my bedroom door, I lay on the floor beside him and waited for him to die. It took longer than I expected; it always does.

He was a big dog—an exact replica of Lassie, only more beautiful, have you ever seen such a distinguished nose?—and I didn't think to bend his legs before the rigor mortis set in. When you lifted him, his legs stuck straight out like he'd been taxidermied. I might have laughed if laughing was a thing I did back then.

And because you were kind, and because I was already heavy with grief, you dug a wider hole instead of snapping his legs. I never thanked you for that.

*

I had a friend once who said she could have whatever guy she wanted. We were teenagers then; we still believed men were worth wanting. *It's so easy*, she said. Adapt to his text-speak, charm his friends, feign interest in the things he likes. She selected one, and two weeks later, he was her boyfriend.

I selected others before you. I selected you. Teenage girls are full of power. I see them sometimes in the grocery store or at the movies, and I think they have power over me.

*

I should have been seven months pregnant by that Christmas, round and off-center. Or I should have been home from my first semester at Westminster, enjoying a respite from the freshman dorm.

Instead, I was standing in my mother's backyard, on semester break from the second-nearest state school, empty uterus, dead dog. Both pasts sealed off, impossible to reach.

*

My first therapist, the one you paid for, said my relief at quitting our marriage wouldn't last forever. The fact of my leaving would come up again, maybe more than once, and I would be made to contend with it.

So here I am, ten years later, contending.

*

I just finished reading *Safekeeping* by Abigail Thomas. People have been telling me to read this book for years; I finally understand why. Thomas got pregnant at 18 in 1960. She married her young husband and divorced him eight years later, after having two more children.

When I tell our story, I obfuscate the timeline. It makes no sense that I got pregnant in May and miscarried in July and we didn't get married until the following June. All that time to change my mind. To say *I was engaged once* is so much simpler than to explain what really happened.

What really happened?

*

Let's not overlook that it wasn't 1960 when my doctor told me I was pregnant. My mother was unmarried when she got pregnant with me in 1989. She wore her old wedding band sometimes, she said, but people were mostly used to it by then.

Your parents were also unmarried when they got pregnant with your sister, sometime around 1985.

We wanted to be adults who made adult decisions. We wanted to be practical. When I explained to our pastor that I could raise the baby in my bedroom—I could already imagine her crib in front of the bulletin board, where I tacked photos of my friends and me at bonfires and football games—he said that I would grow to resent you. Every time I woke to feed her, and you weren't there. Every time I considered how much my life had changed, compared to yours.

Marriage as a way of avoiding resentment. I might laugh, if this were a thing I laughed about.

*

I don't mean to blame the pastor. He was young, too. He wasn't married yet. I could have ignored his advice, listened to my mother instead.

It's just that for those eighteen years, I'd learned to trust men like him. Men who commanded rooms; men who appeared above sin. Men so unlike my fathers, both of them.

The truth is, he was only two years older than you: twenty-three to your twenty-one. I put my future in the hands of just-barely-men.

*

How do you tell the story now? You couldn't hide it, like I did—going back to my maiden name,

transferring to an overpopulated state school where I could sink into anonymity. Always surprised when someone sussed it out: my dentist reaching into my mouth and asking *have you been pregnant recently?*

In interviews with you, they always managed to bring up the marriage. I found the pieces online, made a game out of tracking how long it took them to ask. Years after the fact, and you still couldn't be profiled without an appearance from me.

Meanwhile, I could go on as if none of it ever happened. I started checking *single* instead of *divorced* on intake forms. It doesn't really matter, does it? They both mean the same thing.

*

Still, I carry the evidence in my body. Every time I go to a doctor and they ask how many pregnancies I've had, how many births. Every health form I fill out that asks for my surgical history: *dilation and curettage,* I write, *July 2008.*

Hiding it never served me, in the end. I felt distant from my friends; I feared what new partners would think. But at twenty, twenty-three, twenty-five, I refused to be the divorced girl. I refused to take you with me into my new life.

*

Family-starved was a dramatic way to put it, but that's what I called myself. Father dead, sister gone. My grandmother and uncle, surrogate parents: one newly buried and the other forgetting me.

I thought we could make a family together. I thought I could surround myself with my children and my children's partners and children until I was the matriarch of all those Christmas movies—overly protective, maybe, but charmingly so. Only my second decade of life and already imagining myself as an old woman. That's when I would be happy, I thought; that's when I would feel secure.

*

I met a psychic in New Orleans when I was twenty-six and in the city for a wedding. I'd brought along a single friend as my date; we stayed in a hostel off Canal, where we read books in the pool and ignored the cockroaches that scuttled through the halls. I was a different person by then: less desperate to surround myself with others. Planning a new life far away.

When the psychic asked if I wanted children, I surprised myself with an immediate yes. He ran his index finger over the lines in my palms, read my tarot cards, and predicted my then-boyfriend would soon propose. We would have two children: a musically inclined son, a daughter described by her willfulness rather than her talents.

When he said I would marry only once, I let the phantom children go. They weren't mine, after all.

*

Abigail Thomas married again, twice. Her third husband, she says, is the nicest man in the world.

If I were to marry again, I would prefer to skip over the second and marry my third husband. I realize the numbers aren't in my favor, which is why I started to wonder, sometime around age twenty-seven, if in fact I might never marry again.

*

And yet: when the man I'm seeing now speaks mockingly of marriage, I think, *why are we even together then? What exactly is it that we're doing?*

Old habits die hard, they say.

*

My mother warned me against having sex before marriage. She spoke of the attachment I would feel with a sort of mythological reverence, but I felt nothing of the sort. Only pain.

It took ten years and as many gynecologists for one of them to tell me the pain wasn't something I necessarily had to live with. The physician my insurance referred me to was a man with rough hands who chastised my prolonged birth control use and asked if I was sure the penises I'd experienced weren't too large.

It took another year for me to try a physical therapist. A woman this time, with gentle hands. We talked about muscle memory, how quickly the body learns to expect pain. The shame of admitting you aren't capable of enjoying sex. She lied on my insurance forms, listing priorities other than pain during intercourse, so my insurance company would find it legitimate enough to pay.

All those times it hurt but I tried anyway—sex was expected of me, you made that clear—I was conditioning my body to tense any time someone got close to me. Pain beget pain beget more pain.

The point is: I enjoy sex now, though I imagine my body will always associate you with pain.

*

Since I've begun writing to you, I've dreamed of you. My subconscious isn't subtle enough to mask you in metaphors or faceless men: last night I walked into a coffee shop in a nameless Florida city and there you were.

You didn't recognize me at first. I stalked past you, my unwashed hair covered in a knit cap pulled down to my eyes—maybe this is my fear, that you'll find me unattractive when I finally run into you—and I sat at a table behind yours. You looked the same: pretty cheekbones, forehead curls, that chip in your front tooth from a fall, just enough to be noticeable, to give you a little edge. You turned around to speak to someone and were confronted with the image of your ghost bride, huddled over a cup of tea and resolutely avoiding your stare.

I could lie now, make it a more interesting dream. (Why include it otherwise?) But this is less about the plot of the dream than it is about how unsettled I felt in the morning, like I wasn't alone inside myself. Even now, at the end of the day, my pulse feels quicker than usual; I have to shake my hands every few minutes to come back.

*

The last profile I read of you unnerved me. I couldn't reconcile your voice; you sounded so unlike the boy who dug a wider grave for my dog.

I don't think I like who you are now, so when I say *you*, know that I am writing to the former you, as the current me, and I know very well—I knew it first, even though I didn't trust myself then—that we are strangers to each other, and always will be.

*

We weren't anomalies in southern Missouri. People married young all the time. In my circle, at least, it was considered waiting if you finished college first.

Then again, it was only you who grew up there. My mother and sister thought I would come to my senses, but their disapproval only worked in your favor. When I consider it now—my sudden desire to oppose them—I think it was the most teenage conviction of my life.

*

Still, more than once, I've wished they had found the words to get through to me.

*

You must have known. When I traded my engagement ring, at least eight or nine times. (Surely the jeweler knew.)

When I exchanged dress after dress, despite the bridal store's alleged no-return policy. Taffeta then satin then chiffon then tulle, each one lighter than the last. Days before the date, I bought a tea-length number for the reception, knowing the dress I'd finally chosen would suffocate me.

Every decision to be made, I changed my mind. I wanted to be married outside but settled on church. I wanted contemporary music, custom vows, yet gave up and went traditional on both.

When my relatives from Georgia arrived at the church, they immediately rushed to the nearest florist because I hadn't bothered to decorate the altar.

But here I am again, sloughing off my culpability, insisting you must have known all along. If you knew, then I can't be blamed. (Must someone be blamed?)

*

I look for you in airports. Or I purposefully look straight ahead when walking through airports, so as not to see you. I fly several times a year, and every single time, I fear seeing you.

*

Your parents and I never loved each other, but that night at the reception, when your father grabbed my hands and we danced to Sister Sledge singing "We Are Family," I felt for a moment that I hadn't made a mistake.

*

By now I've become so accustomed to having my own space, I'm not sure I'll ever live otherwise. It's freeing, those times I let my apartment descend into chaos. Like now. I've run out of clean silverware and there are little heaps of trash on every surface, insomnia-fueled

ambivalence evidenced by takeout containers and unpaid bills. No husband to feign healthiness for. No audience to interrupt my moods.

I'll pull myself out it soon enough; I have too many responsibilities to pretend otherwise, but first: the delight of becoming feral.

*

Years after the fact, a male therapist called it a "child marriage." I settled my co-pay at the front desk and declined scheduling another appointment.

*

Last summer in Sedona, I overpaid for fifteen minutes with a medium. She held my hands and closed her eyes and announced that my dead father was bringing me a partner.

It's funny: I still look young for my age. Most people guess early twenties. Yet both the psychic and the medium looked at me and thought *husband*.

Or maybe that's my unbelief coming through. Maybe I looked at both of them and thought *husband*.

*

Are you surprised that over the course of a decade, I've managed to stay unpregnant? That I survived those first desperate years of my body urging me to let it fix its mistake? It felt primal, like my body was running the show, and it wanted to make a baby. The sensation was strangest when I started college and overheard my classmates' desires: a winning homecoming, an acceptable roommate, a passing grade from Mme. Krepps.

I denied the urge for so long that it disappeared.

Do you think you'll be a father someday? Do you ever feel like one already?

*

That time we went for dinner after the divorce, we were so amused with ourselves.

People probably think we're on a first date, you said. I hated that restaurant, its discarded peanut shells strewn across the floor, the constant crunch of passing feet.

When I got home that night, my mother stepped into my room. The walls were still hot-pink and turquoise; I sat cross-legged on my daybed, *Notting Hill* playing on the small television beneath my window.

How's your ex-husband? she said, and we laughed and laughed.

*

On the night of our first date, I turned down another date to go with you. I never told you that. He was going to a baseball game, and he wound up marrying a woman he met seated in his row. They're still together, as far as I know.

*

In college—the second one—my favorite party house belonged to a group of four or five men. I trusted them, particularly O, who was broad-shouldered and protective of me, so when I went to their parties, I let myself go. I would drink and yell and raid their liquor supply. Once, O held a knife to my throat for no particular reason, and we laughed about it for hours.

Eventually, when it got late enough, O would hand me a broomstick or a bat and we would go to the backyard, where he presented me with an object to beat: usually something pliable and satisfying, like a Styrofoam cooler he'd used for beer.

I never felt better during those first years. Holding an aluminum bat in my hand, swinging it above my head and bringing it down like a club, cracking my target in pieces. It surprised everyone at first—I was so quiet when sober, so calm—but eventually they learned to expect it.

There she goes again, they'd say, as I took my first swing.

*

Maybe if I'd seen a happy marriage, I tell my therapist. I've said this sentence more than once. I don't understand the concept of a happy marriage; I see so few of them around me. I've certainly seen none behind closed doors, as I might have had I grown up with happily married parents.

Someone feels trapped, someone feels unheard, someone doesn't want to move to that city, someone wants time alone, someone yells too much, someone doesn't communicate, someone gets on the internet and starts an affair, someone realizes they never really liked the other all that much, someone accidentally falls in love with someone else, someone gets sick and dies, someone's relative dies slowly and the other's empathy runs short, someone misses being twenty-seven and living alone, someone wasn't expecting children to be so difficult, someone's sex drive goes too high, someone's sex drive goes too low, someone disapproves of how the other spends money, someone is tired of doing more of the household chores, someone resents the standing water on the bathroom counter, someone never says *I love you*, someone gets tired of waiting on the other to come home, someone is nineteen and had no business getting married.

*

Once, I stayed next door to a woman who told me about her daughter's wedding day. The

woman had been holding her daughter's train as they made their way to the ceremony when the daughter broke into a run. The woman called after her daughter to slow down. The daughter refused—she couldn't wait to marry the man who was waiting for her.

If my second husband exists, I feel sorry for him. In my most practical fantasies, we go to the courthouse the minute we decide to marry. I can't be trusted not to second-guess myself for the months leading up to a planned ceremony. More so, I'm unsure that I can get through another wedding day without thinking of the first: you waiting in front of the church, back turned, face cracking into a smile when I appear; me swaying at the altar and wishing for one of your nosebleeds.

I'd like to run. I'd like to want to run.

*

I suspect you wouldn't like who I've become either. I trust myself now, and a woman who trusts herself is a frightening thing.

*

Safekeeping is largely about Abigail Thomas's second husband, not the third. It's about other things, of course—independence, motherhood, sisterhood—but more than anything, I read it as a

love letter to her second husband, who's died.

Near the end of the book, she writes, "Once they were no longer married he was free to love her again and she was free to love him too so after a while they did. Because they had always loved each other, and because of the animal they made."

The animal was not their child, but what they were, the two of them together.

I've tried to envision the animal we made. Maybe we created it that morning you buried my dog or the night I danced with your father or that time we finally faced each other in our lifeless apartment and screamed, but the only animal I've found—look at her: snarling, wounded, free—the animal we made is me.

Chapter 7: What to Expect

Weeks 1 and 2: Your body is gearing up for the big O, or ovulation.

I'm technically but not technically pregnant when I cross the stage at my high school graduation. The ceremony's held in the local college's gymnasium. My family applauds appropriately, if not overwhelmingly, from the bleachers: my mother, in the outfit we carefully selected together; my sister, who drove straight from Wichita and is still in her work clothes that smell of zoo; my grandmother (the healthy one) and the aunt who drove her from Kansas City.

I'm also technically but not technically valedictorian: leaving school a semester early—so my mother and I could move to the farm to live with my grandmother—disqualified me for the title. The administration directs me to walk across the stage first, in a gesture of good-will. I go back to my seat and count how many faces I don't recognize in my graduating class of two hundred.

After rounds of photos on the lawn, my black gown unzipped to reveal a red, pleated dress, which could have easily hidden a pregnancy, had I technically been pregnant yet, my family and I go to the local Cheddar's and I eat an entire dish of spinach artichoke dip as my meal. I'm an adult now, and this is the sort of thing adults are free to do.

No boyfriend joins us. I didn't want him to follow me to college, so I no longer have a boyfriend. He doesn't know that I am technically but not technically pregnant, though later he'll say he knew the moment it happened.

Week 3: We have an embryo!

In movies, the last summer before the protagonist goes to college is a heady time. Nostalgia is indulged, long-suppressed sentiments are exchanged between friends or love interests. The single mother, on the verge of empty-nesting, is perpetually emotional; the protagonist grows irritated with her relentless caretaking.

It's true that the last weeks of high school resembled those movies: I went to prom with my sophomore-year boyfriend, who placed an enormous red rose on my wrist while his parents watched proudly. I could forget the dysfunction of our earlier years for the sake of circuity, re-opening a closed loop. Later, we stayed up all night at Project Graduation, a carnival-like production staged in our junior high building that was meant to keep us from drinking. After the sun came up, I drove us to my house and we collapsed into sleep on my bed. When we woke hours later, I stood to leave, but he grabbed my wrist to pull me back, hard enough to hurt. Snapping me out of my nostalgia.

But this is Week 3, the week I go to a concert with S, the boyfriend I didn't want following me to

college. It's his twenty-first birthday. I thought we could still be friends.

And then, there she is: my little zygote, my little blastocyst. My something to hold on to.

Week 4: Your soon-to-be baby has found its home.

I have nothing to do until college starts, so I go with my mother to the farm to start preparing for the auction of my grandmother's things, the sale of the house. It's always been our intention to keep the farm in our family; I assured my uncle, on his deathbed three years earlier, that I would make sure of it.

I'm still under the impression that I'll go to college twenty miles away, at the school my uncle and grandfather and great-grandfather attended (the women weren't allowed in yet, they went to the neighboring college), though I'm no longer sure where I'll spend my weekends when I need a respite from campus. Rather than help my mother and grandmother sort things, I spend my days in the bedroom that was once mine, stretched out on the chenille bedspread and running my hands over the stitching.

After three days of unfamiliar pain, I drive to town and buy an early-results pregnancy test at Walmart. It's my first purchase of the sort, but I've seen this scene in movies dozens of times. I spend as little time in the incriminating aisle as possible, then skulk to the register while holding

the box flush with my thigh. The woman who helps me looks unfazed, though she mumbles *good luck* as I leave.

On the drive home, I realize there's nowhere safe to hide the box, so I pull over at a gas station and sneak into the grimy bathroom, where I try not to touch anything while hovering over the toilet. I can't recall waiting for the results; in my memory, the answer is immediately clear. The test doesn't detect the infinitesimal embryo hanging on to my endometrium, and neither do I, though my body is sending clues: incomprehensible smoke signals from an unknown island, while I float, oblivious, across waves of pain.

Week 5: Your baby is the size of an orange seed.

My doctor says *appendicitis* and sends me to the closest hospital for an x-ray to confirm, and just before the young technician turns on the machine, she asks over the intercom *is there any chance you might be pregnant?*

A small chance, I admit, and then I stay on my back with the lead vest across my chest while she calls my doctor, and presumably a nurse takes my not-yet-discarded urine sample and tests it for hCG, that magical hormone so many women want to detect inside their bodies, and then the technician reappears and says *your doctor wants you to come back.*

She lifts the vest from my chest and I should be able to breathe easier then, but my hands shake as I try to get back in my clothes, and I walk quickly out of the hospital—the one where my mother works, I've been visiting her here for years—and then all of that weight erupts and I am sobbing because I am pregnant, because soon everyone will know I am pregnant, because I can no longer imagine my carefully planned future, and then I am sobbing because someday my child might ask me how I felt when I learned of her existence, and I will have to admit that I was devastated.

I see my doctor again and she says *ectopic pregnancy*, she sends me to the emergency room this time, and I have no choice but to call my mother, only now, at least, I can garner sympathy.

My mother is still at the farm, but within minutes her best friend is at my side, and not long after that I'm staring at an ultrasound image of my uterus when I see the top of my friend's head glide by the tiny square window—she's barely over five-foot, she's in such a hurry looking for me—and then we learn I am experiencing your everyday variety of pregnancy, the pain is my uterus expanding, and the three of us go to Cheddar's and I order a full meal this time, with vegetables and meat.

So if someday my little embryo asks how I felt when I learned of her existence, I can say *I was scared* but then I can add *two kind women were with me, and they helped me feel brave.*

Week 6: Your baby is the size of a sweet pea.

At my mother's house there is a Chow Chow mix in the backyard named Sweet Pea. There is also her sister, Bam; my Dalmatian, Jewel; a large shepherd who showed up at the farm named Miles; my mother's longhaired chihuahua, Cosmo; and eight cats: Lucy, Ollie, Tubs, Cleo, Tiny, Scout, TiVo, and Greyson. My bedroom is the only room the animals don't have access to, so it is also the cleanest, and it's where I spend most of my days this summer.

When my mother returns from the farm, she walks in the door and says *hi, momma* and I smile despite myself. I feel simultaneously the youngest and oldest I've ever felt. In eight months we'll both be mothers, but I'll always be her youngest child. Still, my pregnancy has given me some sort of promotion, in our two-person family unit and the world: my body must be protected now, treated with reverence. I'm among the first allowed on the lifeboat.

I am also trash, a stereotype I've avoided since I learned of it: the fatherless, pregnant teen.

Somehow, though, it's hard to care about my status in the world. I've traveled to that unknown island alone; there's nothing to it now but to stand on the perimeter and consider the wilderness before me.

Week 7: Your baby is the size of a blueberry.

It's shocking how rapidly the body changes. I am pole-like at eighteen, hardly over a hundred pounds, but the lower part of my abdomen starts to jut out noticeably—bloating or the expanding uterus, I can't say. My breasts, hardly an A-cup, swell over the rims of my bras. Topless, I twist and turn before the mirror, enamored with myself, my emerging mother-body. In the mornings, I chew lethargically on saltines. All day, I long for sleep.

Out of a sense of duty, I briefly consider my options, but once it becomes clear that I will enter the wilderness and return with a baby, that's what she is now: *my baby*. Still, I am loath to say the phrase out loud, particularly in public, so I call her Pickle, which makes her feel real but also easily assimilated into my life, like a pet. I say *Pickle* so often I begin to fear that when she appears, no other name will suit her.

Maybe because I've never been so aware of the goings-on inside my body, I am acutely aware of Pickle. I carry her with me from bed to couch to kitchen. (Of those early days, I remember leaving the house infrequently, and when I did, it was on a Pickle-related errand: to have my hCG levels checked, to visit the social worker who oversaw my Medicaid file.) Of the alleged 35,000 decisions one makes in a day, I considered her for all of them.

In my childhood and adolescence, I'd known several kinds of aloneness: my household of four reduced to three and then two; lunches at a new school eaten hurriedly in the girl's bathroom; nights spent by myself while my mother went to work.

With Pickle, I wasn't alone even inside my own body. Of all the changes pregnancy wrought, immunity to loneliness was the greatest of all.

Week 8: Your baby is the size of a large raspberry.

I've always been a good student—even before I realized that I needed scholarships if I wanted to go to college; I enjoyed the praise, being good at something—so it's with great care that I apply myself to the study of pregnancy and impending motherhood.

From my friend's older sister, whose first pregnancy was an accident, I learn how to apply for Medicaid to cover my medical expenses. The crisis pregnancy center, which gave me the free ultrasound to prove to the Medicaid office that I was still pregnant, offers parenting classes where you can earn vouchers for diapers and prenatal vitamins; my mother joins me sometimes to double the payout. They send me home with books: *On Becoming Baby Wise*, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

When S comes over, I slide a book across the kitchen table to him, my finger poised under a sentence I'm too embarrassed to read out loud: "If you're receiving oral sex while pregnant, your partner should be careful not to blow air into your vagina." He looks at me, laughs. *You're not a balloon*, he says.

It's astounding to me how drastically you can alter your life over email. One after the other, I send them out: to my recruiter at the liberal arts college, to withdraw. To my would-be dormmate, to apologize. To an admissions counselor at my backup school, to inquire about online coursework in the spring semester, when I'm due. I'm embarrassed each time at the revelation but also proud of my efficiency. I'm living for someone else now. Gone are the impossible decisions about what I want in life, who I'll become. I don't know how to be myself—to create an adult self—but after years of observing my mother, her limited decisions, I know how to do this.

Week 9: Your baby is the size of a green olive.

One of my fondest childhood memories is watching the annual fireworks show while visiting my relatives in southern Missouri. My mother sent me away for a couple of weeks each summer, the only sort of camp we could afford, the only time she got to herself. The fourth of July always fell toward the end of my stay, or at least that's how I remember it: a grandiose sendoff marked by the scent of scorched earth.

My mother and I moved to the same town after she finished nursing school—this is where I graduated from high school, where I would have my baby—but I have no memory of watching the fireworks in the years we actually lived here. I needed no sendoff. I rarely saw that family.

This summer, though, will be different. I'm feeling nostalgic. I want to create traditions for Pickle. S and I lower ourselves into his old Civic coupe, and I direct us toward the part of town where I used to watch the fireworks with my family. It was a secret spot: one of the nicer, tree-lined residential streets bottomed out into an open field, over which the fireworks loomed as if they were ignited yards away. Skirting the crowds of the city park where thousands gathered made it feel like we were getting a private show. And though I haven't been there since I was a child, I manage to find it again. We park on the hill and S opens the hatchback and we sit in the trunk of his car and wait for the sky to grow dark before catching fire.

I know what's coming—our pastor told us to marry, S knows this night is important to me—but I find myself so enraptured in the intricacy of pyrotechnics, wondering who planned the order of pieces and how, is the process more like a symphony or a museum exhibit?—that I don't notice when S pulls the ring from the pocket of his jeans and holds it out to me. It's enormous, a cluster of small diamonds made to look like a much larger one, it's more than any eighteen-year-old should wear, and when he asks the question I am embarrassed for him, this rote show of vulnerability, and I say yes, yes of course, he already knows I will.

And then I go back to imagining Pickle, sitting on my lap and watching the fireworks from inside the car; and the next year, venturing out a little more, perhaps playing at my feet; and the year after that, running around with other children, no longer scared of the bright lights or the overwhelming sounds. I'm doing it all for her. I'm doing everything for her, and I'm not sorry.

Week 10: Your baby is the size of a prune.

Pregnancy suits me. It's not the studying or the planning or the rearrangement of my life—though I excel in this, I was made for rearranging—it's the *being*. The *being pregnant.* Aside from those first hours, five weeks ago now, being pregnant has felt completely natural. My body was made for this; I can sense that I'm stepping into line, acquiescing to some sort of primordial task.

It took three years for my mother to conceive my sister. No false starts, as far as she knows, nothing at all, until finally: her first daughter. My sister has been abiding by the rhythm method for six years, and no pregnancies for her either.

I can't help but wonder, then, if I'm more maternal than my mother and sister. If there's a reason, rooted in my body, that I conceived so soon, so easily. I rest my hands on my stomach and think of Pickle, think *to* her. *What to Expect* tells me that she's just graduated from embryo to fetus, that tiny tooth buds are forming under tiny gums, tiny elbows are allowing for tiny arms to flex, and though she's already conceived, I continue to conceive of her—I continue to expect.

Week 11: Your baby is the size of a lime.

Slightly more than one-and-a-half inches long now and weighing about a quarter of an ounce, your baby has been pretty busy growing this week.

Your baby stopped growing this week, or last week, or maybe the week before that. Regardless, your baby's heart has stopped beating. Though it's equally possible it never beat at all.

While you can't tell this baby's gender by its cover yet, ovaries are developing if it's a girl.

Of course it's a girl. Your mother had two daughters; your sister will have two as well. You were building a matriarchy together.

Baby has distinct human characteristics now: hands and feet in front of her body, ears nearly in their final shape, open nasal passages on the tip of her tiny nose, a tongue and palate in the mouth and visible nipples. Hair follicles are forming on the crown (as well as over the rest of the body).

Regrettably, you won't be able to see Baby, not even after she's removed from your body—it's not like they come out intact, when suctioned—but here's an illustration that might be comforting: a bubble-gum pink baby-like figure, eyelashes black against a sunset peach background that looks nothing at all like your uterus.

What else makes your baby look human? Those hands and feet have individual fingers and toes (meaning goodbye to frog-like webbed hands and feet). Meanwhile, fingernail and toenail beds begin to develop this week; in the next few weeks, the nails themselves will start to grow (so don't forget to add a baby nail clipper to your shopping list).

We don't know how else to say this: your baby is not human. Your baby will not *become* human. Your body failed, your body did not produce Baby, your body is experiencing a death. There's no need for baby nail clippers, but we suggest the following: alcohol (if you were old enough to buy it), a warm robe, the collected DVDs of *The Gilmore Girls*, a wedding dress.

You might be feeling a bit hungrier these days, and that's good: it's a sign your morning sickness is easing, and your appetite is gearing up to help you nourish your body—and your baby. But don't go overboard just because you're eating for two. Try to gain efficiently by choosing the most nutritious foods.

You're nourishing no one but yourself now, so let loose. Goodbye saltines, prenatal vitamins, leafy greens. What's overboard for an eighteen-year-old girl? You're supposed to gain the freshman fifteen, you're supposed to experiment with throwing up a little, you're supposed to eat, then starve, then eat, starve, eat.

Your lower abdomen is probably just starting to protrude a bit (though you likely look less like you're pregnant and more like you've been overdoing it on the doughnuts).

Your abdomen was already protruding, but now it's caving back in. No one will ever know by looking at you that you were pregnant, though you'll wear your tops loose

now, uncomfortable with the feeling of clothing against your body.

Pregnancy fatigue is normal. That's because you're running a baby-making factory that's in business 24/7, and you're the only employee. Listen to your body. When it calls for a break, take one.

This is the start of a very long break for you. Don't be surprised if you black out, disassociate a little. Don't be surprised if the next year of your life goes missing.

Week 11: Your baby is the size of a lime. (Second Attempt)

My therapist encourages me to express the feelings, not the facts. I'm twenty-seven now, presumably recovered, but I've been holding this story outside of my body for so long that it's stopped feeling real. When I say I woke up that morning and told my mother *I don't feel Pickle anymore* my therapist says *and how did you feel in that moment?* I felt scared, I say. I felt resigned. I felt unsurprised. *That doesn't really tell me how you felt*, she says. I felt empty. I felt like I'd been sucker-punched. I felt like maybe I was making it all up.

I offer more facts: it was another vaginal ultrasound. My mother was in the room, standing behind my head. The ultrasound technician didn't say anything, but they never did. Then my

doctor came in. She was bored-looking and had a neat brown bob and told me there was no heartbeat, the embryo was not viable, I'd had a miscarriage. I felt sad. I felt numb. I felt mad at my doctor for not caring and embarrassed that I'd cared so much.

My doctor scheduled a dilation and curettage procedure to understand what had gone wrong. The procedure was scheduled for Monday, and on Friday I kept my appointment to try on wedding gowns. I wanted something to do, something to distract me from what had happened, what was still coming. Two of my bridesmaids stood behind me in the mirror and *oohed* at every dress I wore. They imagined themselves in the dresses at their own weddings. In the end, I chose a hideous taffeta dress with a halter top. It looked nothing like me, but then again, I wasn't sure who I was in that moment. If I wasn't pregnant but I could never again be someone who hadn't been pregnant, what did that make me?

You're telling the facts again, my therapist says. She calls this move intellectualizing; it's my primary skill. *I'm telling a story*, I say. It's different. The feelings are in the story. They live inside the words. They are *there* and *there* and *there*.

When I say I started to cramp against the tightness of the corset and then I excused myself to the bathroom and saw that I was bleeding, I am saying that I felt like my body was failing me twice over, that I was meant to be Pickle's home for two more days and I was losing those days, I was losing her, she was bleeding out of me. I felt alone.

What else?

I felt alone inside myself.

What else?

I am telling you the worst feeling I've ever felt: to be alone inside myself.

Week 12: Your baby is the size of a small plum.

I've always been a good student, but I'm unsure how to be a woman who's miscarrying. I let my mother make the calls from the land line in the kitchen while I rest on the couch ten feet away. From my mother's response, the way she turns her body slightly away from mine, I can tell my grandmother has asked if the wedding is still on. My shotgun wedding, expected three months from now. I also know that I'm far too tired to do something as difficult as calling off an engagement, but I let my mother mumble her *I'm not sures* to everyone who asks.

The truth is I care little for the wedding, or anything at all. Since the doctor told me Pickle was lost, since the emergency room staff sent me home, still bleeding, and told me to hang on till Monday, I've retreated inside myself, to the space inside my body where nothing can reach me, where the physical pain is so muffled as to be nonexistent, where I can co-exist with Pickle for a little while longer.

I stay deep inside this place while I leave S and my mother in the hospital waiting room, while I slip into another medical gown, while several nurses prep me for surgery, while I count backward from ten and watch my vision white out, and when I wake it's to a nurse's head above mine as she says, *It's okay—I had one too, and now I have three healthy kids.*

I can feel myself expelled from that unknown island, watching the treetops recede as I float out and away, buoyed now by frightening waters—or maybe the water is my friend, just now it's rocking me to sleep, and then the nurse's face disappears and I never see it again, would never recognize her if pressed, though there's someone like her everywhere I turn.

Week 13 through 40: Your baby is the size of a peach, a lemon, a navel orange, an avocado, a turnip, a sweet potato, a tomato, a mango, a banana, a spaghetti squash, a papaya, an ear of corn, a rutabaga, an eggplant, a cucumber, a cauliflower, a small cabbage, a butternut squash, a coconut, a head of lettuce, a honeydew melon, a pineapple, a canary melon, a large cantaloupe, a winter melon, a swiss chard, a watermelon, a jackfruit, your baby is here, welcome Baby, hello little girl.

Week 92: Your girl would be twelve months old.

My friend visits me in my new apartment, where I live with a woman I met on Craigslist. She's the one who collects our mail, feeds our cats—I'm sleeping something like sixteen hours a day, which I don't find unusual but will later learn was a bout of mono—and she never asks why my mail arrives addressed to different surnames. Days ago, I received a particularly thick envelope with an officious-looking stamp in the corner: after sitting on a judge's desk for thirty days, my petition for divorce has turned into decree.

I take my friend to a party, and we sit outside in the dark and smoke the birthday blunt gifted to me by the hosts. We laugh until it feels like our ribs are cracking. We sit on our hands and watch our breaths take shape between us. Eventually I drive us home, though I shouldn't, and my friend mistakes a grocery store for a furniture store and it's the funniest thing we've ever heard, we are beside ourselves with the absurdity of her mistake, with the joy of each other's company.

Week 584: Nine, now. Half your age, when you first made her.

It's easy to feel like you haven't reached land yet. It's easy to forget what solid ground feels like. You've been floating out here for so long now, waiting for someone to tell you what to do, waiting for something you can orient your decisions around, like a map that sprouts out from the center. You've been living two, three years at a time. You've felt unsure about nearly all of it.

No one can tell you how to do this. No one knows anything at all. The center is whatever you decide it should be. The center's always moving, beckoning you along.

Chapter 8: An Essay About Female Friendship

You were first. We have the photo evidence: two bald-headed babies, your eyes bright blue orbs, our mothers beaming in my grandparents' house. When I moved to your school in the third grade, we clung to each other, told everyone *we've been best friends forever*, threatened your already existing friends. We needn't have. I wouldn't stay long. You would win Fall Carnival Queen, your king the boy we both loved, and I managed to be happy for you despite my jealousy. (Winning the cake walk helped.) Our mothers still see each other, still ask about the other's daughter. I know we've reached a certain age because on the rare occasions we're together, we ask about the other's mother.

*

You had something like a thousand siblings, and I loved going to your house, the hot, loud chaos of it, like a kicked hornet's nest, only the hornets really loved each other. I loved your older sisters, too, loved to stare at them, loved to follow them, loved how they never left to go to their father's, because their father was also yours and he lived in your house. At one point in our friendship, I grew closer to your older sister than to you, but this felt like a betrayal, and it's you who's gone down in memory as my friend. (Does that make you feel better? Do you care?)

*

You lived a few houses down on Sycamore—my third house, third friend. I remember going to your house for a birthday party, standing in a circle and singing that song kids sing when they have to swap out the first letters of someone's name—*Hannah Hannah BoBannah, Fi, Fo, Fannah, Me, My, MoMannah, Hannah!* Our names were almost impossible to sing with their three syllables. We could commiserate in that. My blows landed soft, too soft on the piñata, and that was the only time my parents let me go to your house, I'm not sure why.

*

You were the first friends of my choice: I found you on the playground. *Do you want to be friends?* I remember saying to one or both of you, and you said *yes*, and I felt worthy of devotion. I lied to you often—tall stories, nothing important—and you always gave me the benefit of the doubt, or at least pretended to believe me.

*

Mr. Hacker, our fourth-grade teacher, must have grown tired of our wars, always two against one. Being on the outs with you, C, was harder—I had to walk home alone then, spend the evenings wondering how you passed time next door. I haven't forgotten the morning, R, when I sat behind you in the gym, waiting for Mr. Hacker to collect us, and you turned around and told me your mother had died. Out of nowhere. It just happened. I told you about my father. I felt

such tenderness for you, and such regret that I did not know how to heal your hurt.

*

You loved to watch your teenage friends hit on me and then reveal, with a twitch of your perfectly arced eyebrows, *she's twelve.* Even on nights I slept over, your boyfriend snuck into your bedroom, but I was a heavy sleeper back then, so I never heard you have sex. You taught me things without explicitly teaching them; I imagine this is what it would have been like to have a sister in the house. You taught me things explicitly, too: how to leave bumps when I pulled my hair back so it looked effortless, how to sing the word *you* without saying *chew*. My mother thought you were a bad influence, but she also cared for you. It was too hard not to.

*

You took me in, all of you, and spared me from eating another lunch in a bathroom stall. I'm sorry I left when I found a new group—they made me more anxious than you did, they didn't laugh as easily—but I've thought of you always, as I think of you now, with the surprised gratitude of a thirteen-year-old girl.

*

I could never admit my obsession with boys until the three of us started passing notes. We wrote

each other so many lovesick notes, we graduated to a notebook. We nicknamed all the boys, our chosen ones, and faithfully detailed each sighting of them, knowing every piece of information was a gift. We lost track of one another in high school, but I hope our notebook is still out there, a spiral-bound capsule of our desires.

*

I'll never forget that first sleepover, how we stayed up all night talking about our fathers. We ate shrimp-flavored ramen noodles and Swiss Cake Rolls and exposed our abandonments like they were tattoos hidden under our clothes. Something happens when you find someone whose pain resembles your own. You find another piece of yourself; your own words come echoing back.

*

At first sight, my mother called you, admiringly, a *little porcelain doll.* How could I have known then, standing around at junior high orientation, trying not to be seen, that you would one day host my bridal shower, you would be the person my young husband would call when he realized I was leaving him. We have an era's worth of memories—a reservoir of teen girl feelings—but I confess my favorite is the evening you came over while I packed my suitcase for England. I know now how rare it is to have a friend who comes over just to watch you pack.

*

On that awful bus we were stuck on for days, pulled from one colonial site to the next, you let me put your hair into messy buns because I always did it best. After our morning at the beach, I couldn't stop staring at you: the salt met your curls and they created the most beautiful head of hair I've ever seen, or maybe it was just a glory to catch you in your natural state. When I told you, in the seventh grade, that I did not attend school on March 31, the anniversary of my father's death, and this year would be no different, you said *I hope you change your mind.* And when I did arrive, ready, for the first time, to not sit alone and cry all day, you'd made cards for me, one for every class we had together. When your father died, seven years later, I made the drive down for the funeral and stared at you for so long that you asked if I was okay. I felt like I'd failed you then, but really we were just resuming our roles. Maybe that was a comfort, in some small way. I hope it was.

*

We sang trios just to hide in a practice room during rehearsal and talk about sex. We spent late nights in Walmart, posing coyly in front of condoms, in front of beer coolers, in front of tampons. The flash of our digital camera attracted disgruntled employees who told us to move along. We ran away screaming. We sang beautifully together, a three-pronged melody.

*

We shared one magic summer, swimming with our boyfriends in your pool or driving to their

basketball games. You had knee surgery and we laughed raucously when your insulated brace leaked a puddle on the ice cream parlor's floor. We got ice cream almost every day. We were young enough to eat ice cream every day, though I was two grades older than you, your body was still pole-straight, waiting on its curves to emerge. We rolled the windows down when we drove, and you sang along to the radio like you'd never learned to be shy. We drove and drove and drove, and it never dawned on us that we were living the last year of your life.

*

I'm not sure I fully grasped the concept of friendship until I became friends with you. You taught me intimacy: I fell asleep in your bed so many times, the sheets smelled like mine. You were the only friend I took to the farm, my grieving place, and you grieved there too, you understood it. Our friendship would travel through so many iterations, waxing and waning as love interests waxed and waned, and when you got married not long after I did, both of us nineteen, I tried so hard to make it to your wedding. My GPS got lost in the woods, and I hated that I wouldn't be there for this moment, hated that I didn't get to say goodbye. I follow you on the internet now—what else is the internet for, if not following lost loves?—and you look exactly the same, you look like a great mother.

*

We weren't close anymore, but for some reason I told you I was pregnant and there you were,

flying through the emergency room to find me. You'd had a miscarriage months before, I hadn't known, but I reached out to you and you reached back, and you came flying, again, when I lost her. Years later, I left you behind when you got engaged—some would call it *ghosting*, what I did to you—because I couldn't find the words to tell you that I thought you were making a mistake. It pained me, the ghosting, I hadn't known losing a friend could be worse than breaking up with a lover. Years later still, you forgave me, told me of your plans to become a pilot, you were already underway, and the news didn't surprise me: I've always imagined you in flight.

*

You took me in, all of you, the wives and girlfriends of my husband's friends. I felt so isolated from my own people—they couldn't understand me, this decision I made so young, and so clearly out of grief—but you thought nothing of it, you'd made similar decisions of your own. You coached me on the responsibilities of married life, particularly married life with a subculture celebrity always on the road. Though I disappeared, and suddenly, I want you to know that I cared about those friendships, I cared for you. I couldn't see a way to take you with me, and I also knew you'd understand.

*

Truly, I needed those afternoons coming home from class to find you and a couple friends drinking whiskey on the living room floor. I think you knew I was reclaiming my life. I think

you wanted to make sure I didn't take myself too seriously.

*

I said the three of your names in tandem so many times that I finally created a name for you as a single entity. You can't know how much I needed your friendship in that first year, my first as a normal college student instead of a wife, and what a relief it was to finally tell you who I'd been, over a year into our relationship, and realize the revelation changed nothing.

*

The story goes that we didn't become friends for the first five months we lived together, not until the snowstorm that stranded us for six straight days, during which we paraded a plate of brownies around the house in a gratitude ceremony, visited your friend in the neighborhood who had a stash of weed and colorful collection of bongs, heard the refrigerator speak to us and decided to create our own house religion. It felt impossible to leave you, I wanted to go through life together, and when a stranger nearly killed you, I suppressed the urge to call every day and say *I'm so glad you're alive, I'm so glad you're here, I'm so glad you're still with me*. But I want to talk about more than that day: I want to talk about the future. Like tomorrow, when I'll hear something funny and think of you. And this summer, when we'll rent a place for the weekend and talk about going out but order takeout instead and smoke a lot of weed. And five years from now, when you run your own produce farm and are still teaching me the names of all the

vegetables, still bribing me to eat them. And ten years from now, and fifteen years, and fifty years, and have I told you lately that *I'm so glad you're alive, I'm so glad you're here, I'm so glad you're still with me.*

*

When you asked if you should follow him to St. Louis, I said *yes* though I'd never met him, knew only that you wanted to and you needed permission, which wasn't mine to give but I gave it freely. On your wedding day, he walked around looking like he'd gotten away with a heist, all that bliss and adrenaline, and it's true, he did, it was a heist of one of the world's best hearts.

*

In two years of working together at that shitty corporate job, I hadn't realized our friendship was working up its stamina so it could survive on its own once I'd left. You gave me *Buffy* and the standing offer of your guest bedroom in a place where I know fewer people every day. I always take your Netflix recommendations because you have good taste, and also because I know it means something to you.

*

I've intended to follow through on every accountability plan we've made, the three of us, but I

love our mutual failure more, love to think of us in our own cities, working away on our books in silent, in secret, careful not to reveal the pattern of our ebbs and flows, but maintaining complete confidence in the others' projects, the day they finally come to light.

*

When you found me online and told me you were coming back from Libya, I wept in my car. How many years had it been since we were children together—eleven? Twelve? Before the war. We had dinner just once and then I drove to the hospital to meet your new baby. *You'll spoil her*, you said, but I could have held your girl for hours more.

*

That first night in Greece, I followed you because I knew you could lead me to food. I could tell in the way you walked, sure strides and wide shoulders, that you were unafraid of the world, or at least you knew how to act like it. I wanted that. Maybe because we were writing about our lives, maybe because we were living in a small village on a small island floating in the sea, our secrets came out in floods. Or maybe *flood* is the wrong word, because neither of us is prone to grand shows of emotion. Our secrets came out like water pulled from a well, like the part of an estuary where river spills to sea, like the runoff from a tidepool's soft swells. I've run dry of secrets to offer you. I prefer it that way.

*

I trusted you instantly because you introduced me to your cats as if they were people. You invited me into your home. You spoke about my work as if it existed, before it did. We drank wine in my new apartment and talked about how it feels to live alone, how it feels to stop living alone, how it feels to want and need and dread, how it feels to feel all of it at once.

*

You told me you thought you'd be alone in Ohio. You asked if I regretted moving to Ohio and I said *no, you're here.* In the beginning of my mother's memory loss, when I was at the height of my anger, I told you *my therapist says my resentment is rooted in fear, so it's okay that I'm angry* and you said *I think it's okay to be angry even if it doesn't come from fear.* I told you no one showed up at the hospital when I was born and you said *I'm glad you're here*. I said *you know what makes me mad?* and you said *that Stuart Little was a mouse?* My favorite is when you laugh tears into your eyes. I watched you laugh tears beside your grandmother and your aunt, and I was laughing too, but mostly I was staring at the identical eyes in front of me, like I was seeing one woman in three phases, like I was seeing who you'd become.

*

When we met, you were a year from getting married and I was six years divorced, but I rarely mentioned that. The first time we got coffee, I blurted it out. I wanted to be known immediately.

I felt safe being known by you. We meet each other in our work—our past selves, our darkest selves, our selves who never got the chance to exist—and I feel like every one of my selves is friends with one of your selves, I imagine them talking to each other over cups of tea, I imagine them taking up every seat in a well-lit café, unveiling their joys and fears, their most elaborate mistakes, their gleaming, unknown futures.