

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Michelle Zellers for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing on April 27, 2011.

Title: Body of Water

Abstract approved:

Keith T. Scribner

Body of Water is a collection of short fiction about women navigating shifting relationships to their bodies; their bodies of memory and knowledge; their family histories; and their natural and cultural environments. Most of the stories depict girls and women beginning to perceive and push against the bounds of gendered familial and social roles that contribute to their isolation and limit their power. Some portray women coming into closer contact with their desires and amplifying their efforts to reach other people.

Body of Water

by

Michelle Zellers

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Presented April 27, 2011

Commencement June 2011

Master of Fine Arts thesis of Michelle Zellers
presented on April 27, 2011.

APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Chair of the English Department

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Michelle Zellers, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Keith Scribner, whose advice and insight have helped me strengthen the voice in my work, and whose refreshing enthusiasm for the art of the story has inspired greater personal confidence in my vision for this collection. Thanks to Marjorie Sandor for her support, patience, and community-building, which have made the OSU MFA program an ideal place to develop as a writer. I'm grateful to Rebecca Olson and George Caldwell for their service on my committee and to other OSU faculty for their valuable instruction and feedback, especially Tracy Daugherty and Susan Rodgers.

I would also like to acknowledge my cohort and community of writers, particularly the dance contingent, with whom I've enjoyed the fine society and fried pies that sustain a graduate school experience. Thanks, too, to friends in CGE Local 6069 for their vibrant company in fighting the good fight.

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The practical nurse is the only nurse
with her plastic valise of poultices and salves
her hands of glove leather and ebony
her ledgers of pain

The practical nurse goes down to the river
in her runover shoes and her dollar necklace
eating a burrito in hand

it will be a long day

a long labor

the midwife will be glad to see her

it will be a long night someone bleeding

from a botched abortion a beating Will you let her touch you
now?

Will you tell her you're fine?

Adrienne Rich, from "Sleepwalking Next to Death"

The Patients

She had chosen to climb a tree that looked like a sling-shot from which she might spring, and now she waits in the fork of the tree for her father, her palms pressed against its two divergent arms. She has never stood like this: lofted, above yellow busses rounding the blacktop, above older boys who launch themselves off swings into the woodchips. Marissa raises a hand toward the sun and looks at the gleaming dust in the spaces between her fingers. Dust is mostly skin, according to Ms. Reese, who says everything is living. Her dad says that's an exaggeration (her teacher is a hippie), but right now even the tires humming on the blacktop below feel alive to Marissa. She glances at the cracked toe of her sneaker, pinched in the crook of the mossy V.

Most days, she stays after school in the Happy Rain latchkey for kids who don't have somebody sitting around at home to watch them. No latchkey on Tuesdays, though, when Dad cleans her elementary school, and at 3:15, meets Marissa and Alex by the pair of metal seahorses to walk them home. At the age of ten, she's aware that just Tuesday shifts at her school is not enough work, and that thirty hours a week from several *different* jobs is bad; you don't get health insurance: something her parents used to fight about, stomping across the ceiling

overhead, especially just before—Marissa was in third grade, then—her mom started living where the doctors could watch her. Marissa would gulp milk at the kitchen counter and listen, learning how the piss pot of a school she went to gave out these shit hours on purpose to screw everybody.

She spots her father, waiting in the woodchips, swaying as the cars clear out. After what Barry said at latchkey yesterday, she's decided to make her dad look for her. Barry had only said, "Marissa's dad is a drunk," but her brother was there, and he'd wanted to know what that meant. She ignored Alex, staring at the clock. Barry didn't stop: "A drunk can't see where he's going, that's *one* of the signs..." She reminded Alex how their dad walks them home every Tuesday, seeing just fine. Then some girl in her brother's grade said, "Yeah, *Barry*, how do you think Alex's dad sweeps the whole gym floor if he can't even see?"

Her dad isn't trying to see now, just hanging his head and rubbing his neck. The latchkey kids have been called in, and Alex is the only kid on the playground, pumping his legs on the swing set behind their father, whom she hopes none of the latchkey kids are watching now, from the window. She flashes with her first real anger at her dad for this, this when Mom is gone, her mom who used to lie in the grass with her. On Sunday visits, if it's warm, Mom meets them in the hospital courtyard, but if Marissa spreads out on the green lawn, she says, "No, sweetie. They're watching us, the people up there in those rooms" and points up the ivy on the walls to the stacks of windows behind which the patients are cordoned.

Marissa imagines them pulling their hair at their bedsides. These day her mom looks like a scrap of rubber balloon zigzagging to the floor.

She rips moss off the tree and throws it to watch it scatter. She thinks of how yesterday, when Barry told her brother a drunk can't see where he's going, he snaked one hand across the table and crashed it into his other hand saying, "Vroooooo...boom! A drunk's not even a man." He looked up at Marissa. "Because he can't take care of his *family*."

Her dad drags a leg around the seahorse and sits. His sneaker tops lie face-down in the woodchips, his knees hang, and his legs make backwards Ls. She has just learned the word "pathetic" (in the hospital lobby, when some boy said, "Grandpa looks pathetic," and some lady relative of his blurted out, "Don't you talk about Gerald that way!"), and that's how her father looks, sitting on the seahorse in a way where he couldn't even bounce if he wanted to. He makes the metal coil useless. He rests his head on the seahorse's head.

In a moment, when she jumps down and crosses the playground to wake him, she'll kick the metal spring to shake him with her first experimental violence. Holding his hand on the walk home, she'll feel him lagging behind her and yank. He'll say, "Hey, hey there, champ," and "Don't rip the arm out of the socket, now..." but she'll do it again to pull them both forward. She'll do this until he finally has to cry out and let her go.

HEATHER & DIANE

Visit the Kohl's Store Adjacent to the Mall of America!

Heather's mom, a servant of the public health and a servant of God, was known in their town for her deft, high-pitched renditions of the Gospel songs at church that sometimes rose into impassioned cries (sexual, in a way Heather feared everyone at the parish had already noticed, and the terror of this contributing largely to her current Agnostic identity). Her mom was also a hard-ass agent of the Minnesota Department of Health for whom food venues cleared a path, and who left a certain wake herself, the ring of her voice shaming staff with, "Molluscan shellfish? Where is the 'date shucked' label required by The Code, Provision 36?" long after her beige slacks had swished down the hall and her big hair was gone. With her powers of inspection, Diane had snooped in her daughter's bedroom all through her growing-up years, tempting Heather to author alarming diaries, but she resisted, so as not to bait further interaction with her mother, whose voice she needed to get out of her head.

On a diet preparing for a trip to the Bahamas now, her mother was inspecting nutrition labels even more closely, studying them as if they were The Code. She used this information to calculate further statistics, like calories per

ounce, down to the second decimal; she'd bought a food scale some months back and had taken to weighing everything. At the dinner table, she cited Dr. Atkins and Dr. Agatston, whose giant author photos graced her diet books, as advisors and muses for the meals she served, which she then prayed over.

Heather's mom wore sexier clothes than most Christian mothers. Gauzy blouses that dangled the prospect of her cleavage, where the large gold effigy of her Lord and Savior lay. She shopped bargains, picking up overstuffed floral bedding and lace lingerie at a third of the original price, saved her receipts, and reported her savings to the cent at each month's end, though nobody cared. In addition to getting Diane's voice out of her head, Heather needed to stop getting suckered into Kohl's trips to buy all that shit, with her mother strutting down the aisle in slacks, the light flashing in her oversized crucifix, and worst of all: some frumpy shopper dude turning to watch her pass. That was Heather's curse.

Though she feared becoming either of her parents, she cringed especially at the thought of becoming her mother, whose cyclical mind did so much weighing and praying.

Diane had not been snooping in her daughter's room that day. Her husband, Daniel, would later allude to the importance of respecting their daughter's privacy, but the truth was that she'd been dusting—in doing so, shuffling a few papers, which was to be expected—and her world was simply one

in which red flags tended to rear their ugly heads when you started turning over surfaces. In this case, she'd found a Post-It listing her daughter's Internet passwords, and though most appeared innocent enough, the password listed for her Bank of America account was "Shrooomz" (case-sensitive and spelled just like that), which she knew to be a drug reference. She feared Heather might be in the throes of a rebellious stage.

Not so. Because that was four years ago, and she has seldom since found a piece of troubling information while browsing her daughter's accounts. Heather simply has eccentric tastes. She visits a website on ice chewing, for instance, and one on men with long hair (but what did it matter to Diane, really, who Heather ended up loving, as long as he was able to hold down a decent job despite not sporting the clean-cut look). Though you couldn't always protect kids from smut, she'd tried hard and had done a good job keeping out the video games, the six o'clock news, the trashy talk shows, *Captain Planet*; Heather was a lovely girl who had a good head on her shoulders now.

Yet one thing still troubled Diane. She knew her daughter was lying about spending her upcoming spring break in Niagara Falls with a few girlfriends. She didn't have the money, according to her online bank statements. And if she didn't have other plans, it seemed unfathomable that she'd skip out on a free vacation with her parents in the Bahamas.

Diane sometimes wondered if she'd been overbearing, if in her desire to fill Heather with all the knowledge she'd collected over the years, she'd somehow pushed one of her daughter's buttons. Diane voiced this concern to her husband, who said not to worry, that Heather was really shaping up to be quite a negative person in general and there was no reason to believe the cold distance she kept from Diane was specific to their relationship.

"Cold distance?" She didn't know what he'd ever seen that he'd interpret as that. On the contrary, she thought she and Heather were quite close, used to trot along the beach together during family vacations, the tide sweeping at their feet, the dog barking, the little hairs curling up around Heather's face. "I don't know Daniel. Back when I led the Brownies, Heather was a chatter box. You remember when she—"

"That was years ago, Diane. She was a child then."

He was right. She and Heather were both in need of some mother-daughter time, and since Heather had come home from college for the weekend, what better thing could there be than a Kohl's outing? She got out of bed and walked into the family room to propose it.

Heather was slumped there, watching TV. She'd fallen asleep last night the same way, surrounded by cans of an energy drink called ROCKSTAR (deemed safe by Diane, after some Internet investigation). It was sweet, she reminded herself, that Heather had her own dormitory now and could arrange things her own way,

figure out her own way of being in the world. She could still come around to neatness and tidiness later in life, when she had a family and it really counted.

Diane grabbed a Lysol wipe from the kitchen and cleaned beneath the tall cans as she picked them up.

“Now who’s all going on this little road trip?” she said, but had to ask a couple more times before her daughter answered.

“Jen, Jess, and Nikeisha.”

Her daughter was certainly quick with the lies. But like Daniel advised, Diane needed to simply slough it off, pretend less knowledge so as not to intrude. She’d grown up with parents who turned their share of doorknobs uninvited, and Diane didn’t want to become that kind of intervening presence. She hoped she’d taught her daughter enough to make the right choices on her own.

Her mom walked in and started at it with the questions and the Lysol. Though her compulsion to wipe the coffee table as soon as she saw it was a manifestation of some overblown fear of germs (it was as if she perceived magnified *E. coli* cells, crawling, where everyone else saw a fingerprint), Heather had to admit, with the dirty plates lying around, she was sitting in a pile of her own mess, and her mother, with the unnecessary plastic gloves and the third-degree about the Niagara Falls trip (which was a decoy), made her feel quite uncomfortable about it.

She tried to ignore her but was bored by the television anyway. She was stuck watching Home Shopping, as it was one of the few channels her mom hadn't censored years ago with the V-chip. They were playing a skit with three glossy-haired teenage girls in which one girl said to another, "Stop lollygagging! You have to do your make-up, and we all know that usually takes you hours. This is exactly why you can't hold down a job. You have no time management skills." With this inane shit on television, she might as well talk to her mom. She darted her eyes over and rattled off a list of friends supposedly going to Niagara Falls. Hell, maybe they'd even have a conversation.

"Uh huh. Think you'll find yourself a little boyfriend on this little trip? After all that searchin'?"

Never mind. She turned the volume up to thirty-five. "You obviously haven't seen my latest acquisition from HSN.com," the girl on TV bellowed.

"Bet you'd like a new bathing suit this year, huh?" her mom said louder. "That pink one's pretty faded?"

This was getting frustrating. Out of the corner of her eye, Heather could see her mom watching her from the kitchen while cleaning her ears with two Q-tips at once. At a younger age, she'd wondered if her mother secretly possessed an eccentric, even dark sense of humor, as it seemed plausible that many of her actions were performed ironically.

"Mom, people don't swim in the Falls," she called back.

“Smith is no longer a bathroom hog,” said the blonde girl. “Perfect shadow and lashes in just a few minutes.”

Heather sighed, unable to believe this crap they were showing actually lured people into buying anything.

In her peripheral vision, she saw her mother flip the Q-tips simultaneously. As she grew, she’d abandoned the hypothesis about Diane’s sense of humor. It began to seem more likely that she was actually irony blind, which Heather imagined as some kind of minor disability on par with tone deafness.

“Well, I bet you’ll need a new suit this summer for Nana’s cottage. What do you say then how ’bout a trip to the mall in Bloomington?”

It occurred to her that she could use a new swimsuit for spring break in Cancun. Her father would drive her back to campus Sunday, and with finals this week, it would be difficult to get to one of the malls around Minneapolis before the trip. Of course, her mom’s mall offer was code for visiting the freestanding Kohl’s in the same parking lot as the mall. Diane shopped almost exclusively there, in addition to TJ Maxx, to avoid the smells of chocolate chip cookies at the heart of the mall, which she called “Temptation.” Idly, Heather’s mind returned to previous shopping trips, like the one when her mom scribbled a list of colors she should avoid on a 3-by-5 card. She didn’t want to go through trial after trial of strappy, brightly-colored suits, turning before the mirror and her mother, imagining parading her fat legs around guys who were surely expecting better goods. But in

her pink-striped bikini (faded, her mother was right), she'd look like an outdated car model, invisible next to Nikeisha and Ellie, whose sleek curves seemed to come naturally.

“What do you say, Missy...”

“I'm not buying a swimsuit at Kohl's.”

“That's right. My treat. Let your mother have a little bit of fun and reward you for that good report card!”

“I'm in college, Mom. They're not called 'report cards,' okay?” She sighed loudly and slid her feet into flip flops.

The girls were cruising with their music way up on the way to the Mall of America. “What kind of swimsuit are you thinking this year, hon? One-piece, two piece?”

Heather groaned. “Two, assuming I can even wear it.”

She worried when Heather spoke like this, worried her self-esteem was suffering, and so she refrained from asking if Heather was getting enough fiber in her diet, because she looked a little bloated. Yet it took so much energy not to give pointers when Heather appeared, at times, nearly blind to cause-and-effect relationships. She didn't clean make-up brushes, for instance, accounting for the acne and occasional sties, which she attempted to cover with mascara, then reused the same brush, infecting the other eye. Diane had tried (with discretion, through

hinting) to tell Heather that you had to think about how the bacteria got there in the first place, and not just Stridex over it. It was the same reason she was always encouraging Heather to wear more sunscreen: the wrinkles crept up faster than you knew. Preventative measures, Diane was always saying.

“What are you doing?” Heather had been resting her head against the car window, and now she jolted ahead. “Holy shit, Mom!”

“Watch your language.”

“You’re driving like a lunatic.”

The situation was simply one in which there was a yellow light, and she was unsure whether to stop or go. In this instance, she’d made the wrong call. The light was turning red just as she was driving under it. She needed to warn the drivers on the cross street that there was one more car coming, so she proceeded slowly through the intersection, beeping steadily to make the Impala’s presence known. If that looked strange to Heather, it was because she was a less experienced driver.

It was true that Diane was a little more cautious than most (some would say very cautious), but she played it off. “Need I remind you of who among the family—including aunts and uncles!—possesses the cleanest driving record? Let’s drop it, shall we?”

Heather was still tense, pressing her palms against the passenger door and the center console, because when her mother got on the subject of her driving record, she did not get off it readily. No one had beeped, Diane maintained. Just one person objected. “And surprise, surprise,” she said. “That person is Heather.”

But this wasn’t the only time her mom did something no one else had ever seen, at the shocked silence that often followed didn’t equate to social sanction. Not when Diane told stories about the backs of restaurants to Heather’s friends—who would sit up, eager for an exposé—and ended up revealing only her own embarrassing mind, which leaped from minor violations of rules to visions of lethal outbreak. Not when she distributed laminated manuals on hand washing to these same friends. Not when she drew off-the-wall parallels to the Second Coming of Christ, and not now.

At the light, Heather’s mother flipped down the visor to look in the mirror. “Is there lipstick on my teeth?”

“Mom, there’s a mirror right in front of you.”

Her make-up was perfect. It always was, and it was always on. She was actually quite beautiful, which was maybe the reason that in her ardent but frivolous fight against germs, other people seemed to accept her as some kind of born-again Charlie’s Angel. Every day she donned her beige clothing and her

dopey, do-gooder attitude. She steam rolled her platinum hair and painted her lashes religiously.

Taking those kinds of steps just made Heather look like a clown. Why had she agreed to go to Kohl's? They came in view of the store, big and brown-bricked. They parked several rows behind the farthest parked cars and walked to the entrance, where she was surprised to find a teenage boy this time, rather than an old person, giving her mom the once-over. A woman at the door handed Diane a green piece of cardboard that said "\$10."

"Can my daughter have a coupon, too?" Diane asked the woman, then winked at Heather. "Shall we?"

They began walking the path that funneled them, in one big loop, around the merchandise. Because it was February, lingerie with faux-fur collars draped from the faceless mannequins. Red fishnets climbed up the plastic legs.

"I'll have to shop for *those* another day."

"Stop."

When they passed the home electronics section, her mom veered off.

"We don't need another scale."

"I'd like to get one for the basement!" she called out, louder than necessary.

When Heather caught up with her mother, she saw, strung along the aisle, eight black and white scales, all labeled with "TRY ME!" stickers. Her mom tried each in turn with the grin she wore at the gate of a Ferris wheel ride.

“Heather, hop on this one and see if you think it’s accurate.”

Her mom frequently tried to pressure others to collude in her OCD. It was as if she were trying to recruit for a Compulsive Cadre, which Heather imagined would perform pointless actions in unison. She refused to try the scale. Her mom claimed all of them were imprecise.

“142. Well, I can’t believe that one.”

“Were you expecting it to be lower or higher?”

“Lower, God help me.”

Her mom was skinny at 142 (or whatever the number was; the reading always varied a bit as Diane checked again and again, trying to affect the reality). Heather recalled reality TV shows where they showed six-foot models weighing in at 125. She thought of how their contours still had to be cut with airbrushes to produce those images of tanned gazelles that held Heather, envious and awestruck. It all seemed so impossible.

The scales at Kohl’s did look sleek, but it was tough to get an accurate reading. Heather, who’d been quiet for most of the trip, was suddenly at it with her wisecracks.

“You treat these scales like the mirror from Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Mom. It’s like you go into another zone.”

“You’re very inventive. What do your friends up at school think about that?”

“What are you talking about, Mom?” She sighed.

These kids, if you didn’t speak their lingo, you couldn’t talk to them at all, but Diane was content to walk to the swimsuit section in silence, knowing her daughter’s oppositional attitude would fade. She’d grown like a weed and passed through a number of phases, really. Once quite enamored with everything her mom said, she now avoided home, unless she wanted her laundry done (properly, so it wasn’t a wrinkled mess), even invented fake vacations to keep away. So Diane supposed she should look on the bright side, be grateful for even this time. Here they were at wide-aisled Kohl’s, in the midst of unbeatable sales.

They reached the swimsuit section, where the Juniors’ suits looked a little too adult for Heather. Her daughter flipped through the rack and pulled out a suit the color of bronze, something that would flash in the sun.

“Oh, that’s risqué.”

She grabbed that one for her pile.

“Now, that’s unique...”

But she blew right past the cute pastel tankini with the plaid and the ruffles. “Take a look at that one, Heather.”

“Generally, my problem is finding something cut generously enough to mask my blubber. But these are actually too conservative, Mom. Really, it’s just a

difference of a couple centimeters, but you can't wear a top with a high front and high back like that *and* boy shorts. You'd have to pair that top with a G-string or something."

"Well, you want to look like a nice girl."

"You don't know what I want."

She felt a pain in her chest as she watched her daughter's back. "Looks like you've got six items now, Heather," she said, but her daughter didn't turn. Then she looked back, glaring at Diane, who realized she had clapped once just now, loudly, to get her daughter's attention. "Come on, let's try these. If you need different sizes when you're in there, you can hand them off to me, and I'll swap 'em out."

At the dressing room, Diane hung back, figuring her daughter didn't want her going in the stall with her like she used to. Heather paused before closing the door, seeming to expect Diane to follow, then glanced behind her and latched it. A minute later she emerged in a skimpy pale blue bikini.

"Turn around. Oh, your backside is practically hanging out of that."

"Whatever. I don't like it anyway."

Next she tried a green one-piece that criss-crossed in the back. It made her look too thick in the middle.

“Oh, now that’s cute. Why don’t we just try a darker color? To slim ya down right here?” Playfully, she poked Heather’s side with her index finger.

“What do you think, Heather Bear, black or navy?”

But she stared blankly. Diane felt an urge to leave then, quickly, to get out of the fluorescent light they were standing under and do something useful for her daughter, so she went to grab the larger sizes.

Suddenly her mom poked her love handle. She shuddered. Her mom left the dressing room fast, shouting another question she couldn’t make out. She closed the door to face the mirror, where her eyes honed in on the green bulge of her right love handle and stared in disbelief. The image flashed before her as the fluorescent light flickered over her head. She felt the way she often felt right before she got a migraine.

She stepped out of the green suit and put on another, but the straps cut into her shoulders and made her fat bulge on either side. All the clothes were like this: miniature (and not like they were made for a younger girl, but for a different kind of girl). She should probably give up and wear a T-shirt at the pool like a 14-year-old tomboy. Guys never saw her anyway (paradoxically, because she took up too *much* space). To them she was simply a roadblock to be looked around in their visual quest for the real thing, which they hoped was standing behind her. She felt silly now for believing in Cancun things would somehow be different.

She leaned her head against the wall of the dressing room stall and tried to remember how many old roaches she had in a Ziploc bag at home. She could probably scrape a joint together, then call Jen, and they could smoke on Jen's roof and eat a bunch of her mom's leftovers from her dinner party last night. She felt a jolt, and her head knocked against the wall. Her mom was banging on the door. She turned and opened it. Across her mom's entire wingspan draped a sarong. It was beige and dotted with hunter green fabric paint in a design that tended, failingly, toward the psychedelic. There was light pink fringe.

"Holy fff—god, what's that?"

"Good find, yeah? From the Misses' section! Thought you might want a cover-up."

She looked at the tag. "I'm not a size fourteen, Mom." She knew body dysmorphia was when a skinny or average-sized girl looked in the mirror and saw the image of a fat girl instead. Maybe her mother suffered from this condition, only applied to Heather's body.

"We girls tend to collect a teensy bit of cellulite right where the thighs touch."

Cellulite. She hated the word. She thought about it pooling up on the ground, all translucent and amorphous. Then she felt her gag reflex.

"I have to pee."

She walked fast to the Women's Restroom, a long, narrow hall of chrome, which was empty, thank God. Somewhere near the end an auto-flush toilet had gone awry. It flushed continuously.

She kneeled on the tiled floor and stared into the toilet bowl. She tied her hair back in a low pony tail, placed two fingers down her throat, heard the awful gagging sound, and pushed farther. Soon staring at what was her breakfast, Heather saw how she was getting quick at this, and maybe it could become her ritual (if clothes and make-up didn't help), because if nothing else, she was good at recognizing when she'd gotten all stuffed up with gunk again. Pasty puddles of granola floated in the toilet water. Watching them swirl, she was satisfied by the thought that their filth was out of her body.

She popped a stick of gum in her mouth on the way back to the swimsuit section.

"Heather, come look. Here's the same one you had last year. We could get it one size up."

"Yeah, that's fine. That one's great. Let's go."

"Don't you want to try it on to make sure? Or at least pick up some sandals while we're here? I saw some cute ones..."

"I don't feel very good."

"Oh." She frowned with concern, then touched Heather's forehead. "No fever."

Heather smiled apologetically. She searched for her mother's own phrase. What was it? *Bad shopping day today*, Diane would sometimes say when she walked through the door. *Like spilled milk. Nothing to cry over.*

"It's just a bad shopping day, Mom."

"Oh." She smiled softly and rubbed Heather's shoulder.

In line at the front of the store, they waited a long time. There were six full shopping carts ahead, and it seemed everyone wanted to open a Kohl's charge account. Heather glanced at the giant five-dollar stuffed gorillas by the check-out. They were probably made in a sweatshop, but some of the proceeds went to American children. No one needed a stuffed gorilla, or the other heaps of shit they bought at Kohl's (mainly *because* it was on sale), but here she was, lined up to buy this crap like everyone else.

She thought of Cancun, only a week and a half away. There would be no way to take off the excess weight beforehand. She dabbed away a tear forming in the corner of her eye before anyone saw it.

Although maybe her mother saw, because she offered to give her the keys so she could sit in the car ("blast the heat, and your music, too, if you want," Diane added).

Heather shook her head. "I'll wait with you."

“Why? I just want to understand why she wouldn’t want to come.”

The couple lounged in adjacent chairs, poolside, in the Bahamas. Tropical birds in hanging cages cawed through the clear blue sky.

“Diane, you have to stop obsessing about this. She’s a college girl. Lord knows what’s running through the minds of females that age.”

She sighed. But as she watched the young children splash in the kiddie pool, her mind returned to Heather. Where was she? Perhaps at home, Lord knows why. Maybe studying at the library; she was so studious. Or maybe, somehow, she made it to the Falls with her girlfriends after all.

The list of things Diane could do for Heather, needed to do—packing lunches, driving to practices, picking up art supplies—used to fill her black books, but with less and less of that now, she supposed the job of motherhood was winding down.

“Nonsense. You have a daughter. That means you’re still a mother,” Daniel reminded her. “Just enjoy the moment. Look where we are.”

She frowned deeply and slid her sunglasses over her eyes. He was right, she knew. When could she take a load off if not here, where the water was bluer than any she’d ever seen, even as a girl? Suddenly she thought of a task she could undertake, when she got back home: rearranging the photo albums, which had gotten out of chronological order, and who knew what kinds of microorganisms

festered on the plastic protectors, which hadn't been cleaned in ages? She could dust each page and revisit the photos simultaneously. She could buy a nice rack from the Crate and Barrel catalog when she got back to the hotel room, then set up the books all together in the family room.

It was just the third day in Cancun and so far it had been a whirlwind of all-night partying, waking and baking, tanning by the pool, and starting over. She knew her mother was suspicious about the trip she was taking, probably because she'd been logging into the near-empty Bank of America account that dated back to tenth grade, when Heather first learned that her mother spied on her. In the weeks leading up to this trip, her mom kept saying, "How's that Bank of America account? Gettin' low?" which irritated her, and yet creating decoy paths to websites on anarchy, birthing children in water, and underground gambling didn't produce the satisfaction it used to. But one thing did satisfy. She was here, and her mother didn't know. She was nineteen, for God's sake, and finally, here was an experience her mom didn't have control of.

She dove into the swimming pool alongside Kevin, and they started racing. They'd hit it off during beach volleyball yesterday. She'd only slept with two men before, and she decided now, in the blue water, with the stream of light

illuminating both their bodies, that she wanted to sleep with Kevin. She liked the swishing of his hair.

Heather quickened her pace and ended up touching the wall before him. When the two of them emerged, splashing, everything happened the way Heather wanted it to. He dunked her playfully. She let out a scream. The sunlight glittered on the water. Later, in the pool, they kissed for the first time.

Of course, Kevin had to go chill with his boys at the casino. But later, the two of them could chill together. She said she'd like that. She watched him walk away, then giggled as she half-walked, half-ran toward the patio where her friends were having lunch.

As she was jogging past the gift shop, a glass building, she caught a glimpse of her reflection, then froze before the building for a second just to make the jiggling stop.

She didn't look a cow. She looked like a wooly mammoth, because clearly she missed a few places while she was shaving her legs this morning. And though the striped bikini she'd bought at Kohl's, a size large, wasn't yet crawling up her ass, she obviously had no business wearing stripes anymore. In the sun she could see the dark spots from three pimples she'd had last week. Her hairline was greasy.

She dripped all through the lobby, thinking she could just text her friends the news about Kevin, or not. She'd see them later. They would want to go out tonight, in those halters and nothing shorts that Heather could never wear.

She was glad to find the elevator empty. In her mind she was already dumping out her suitcase, searching for quick fixes: the right figure-flattering clothes or a pair of control top panties. In her head she was already leaning over a toilet, getting rid of whatever she could find deep down. If worse came to worst, she would have to buy some laxatives from the hotel gift shop. But that would mean she'd have to walk past the glass building again.

The elevator dinged at floor six. She remembered a long skirt that could cover her fat legs. She imagined the possibility of a scarf to fix her double chin problem, then pictured herself: no different aside from the divider between her head and the rest of her body. With a scarf her body would look even more like a tree stump.

She arrived at the door. Someone was rounding a far corner. It sounded like a big man. When she looked, it was only a big woman with thinning blonde hair, trailed by a blonde child who was not yet fat.

She felt relief it was not a man. She had been crying, and she sniffled now as she fumbled with the key card. *This goddamn key card.* The instant before she saw the woman, she'd begun to imagine her own body, as if from someone outside of herself. Still trying to get into the room now, her body continued to appear before her in pieces: the fat white legs, the convex belly spilling over the bikini bottoms, the white and dripping chest—exposed, so people could see almost

everything—except the heart underneath, which was thumping by the time
Heather noticed it.

Energy to Burn

1. April 17th

The mouse was missing the tip of his tail, and we didn't know where he'd come from. Me and my twin, Rachel, found him seven years ago today, on April 17th, when Mom gave birth that final time. We'd been doing social studies homework in the den, eating pepperoni pizza, waiting for the phone to ring, so we sat in the light of our mother's lamp examining the short-tailed mouse. We shared our pizza with him, sticking gobs of mozzarella to the carpet.

Then, in the year that followed, I found certain things in the attic that I never shared with Rachel. An empty pile of clothes from the last outfit Mom wore. A scan of our stillborn brother's brain: shaped like a chicken on an oval platter and filled with darkness. Because Rachel cried harder at the news when we were ten years old, I thought I was the stronger one, able to contain truths silently.

It is April 17th of our senior year at St. Mary's in bio lab when we meet the next mouse. Mr. Marlowe pulls him from the bag. He's whole and bluish. We let him lie upturned on the bed we've made him: an accordion of paper towels. He begins to wet the sheets with his fluids, and I gaze at the V of his mouth, spiked

with delicate teeth. Like most dead rodents, he appears to have died in shock, but with a little fight left in him. I sniff twice. The mouse reeks.

I stand idly, because Rachel is doing all the dissection, and I'm just making the PowerPoint. I watch her lift and position a small knife and slice the belly all the way down. She opens it easily, with her characteristic mix of attention and carelessness. She doesn't even know what day it is.

We've been in a fight since breakfast. We were standing by the four-slot toaster, waiting for our waffles to brown.

"Ruby, I decided," she'd told me, upbeat, as though I'd be excited. "I picked Johns Hopkins." And the words hung.

"You're going to become one of them." I flipped the Mrs. Butterworth bottle and doused my waffles. "They *killed* Mom, you know. The doctors killed her."

"Ruby..."

I wouldn't look at her, but with our heads in opposite directions we said all the usual things. Mom told them she had a bad feeling, but how many doctors, after all, listen to bad feelings? Of course doctors didn't listen; that was exactly my point. And Rachel of course swore she'd become a different kind of doctor.

"Fucking listen to me now," I finally told her. "*I* have a bad feeling about *you* going to Johns Hopkins."

“Christ,” she muttered. “You’re fucking selfish, Ruby, you know that?” She turned from the counter too quickly with her plate and smacked the edge of mine, spilling syrup down her wool sweater and my cotton one. She clamored upstairs to our room to change. I followed. We didn’t speak until we pulled into a parking space and gazed at the ramp that led to the back of our high school.

“Baltimore?” I said, staring through the windshield into the foggy morning. “Fifteen hours away.”

“Maybe you could transfer there next year.”

Now Rachel pries beneath the incision with a metal stick and opens the flaps of skin as nonchalantly as she would a closet. There are still four claws, whiskers hanging limply from a pointed head, and that squiggle of a tail. But the rest of the mouse is something like an electrical box in an old house, or maybe like a map: organs twisting like rivers, veins spreading like networks of cracks in dirt.

The boys at the next lab station are talking about music: some stupid Coheed and Cambria concert. Rachel likes the one with the idiotic five-inch side bangs.

“Julian,” she sings as she steps around the corner to their lab station. She asks for clarification on one of the steps and touches his forearm.

“You need to look for *two* sets of lymph nodes,” the nasally kid next to Julian says. “They should each be the size of a *bean*.”

Rachel darts her eyes at me. “Are you writing this down?”

Mr. Marlowe is out of the room, so I'm able to rip out my notebook page—delighting in the sound of the tear—and feed the corner to the Bunsen burner. I watch Rachel's eyes widen and Julian's face go slack.

"The fuck's your problem today?" she shouts. Everyone looks over, saying "Whoa" and "Holy shit."

I blow, little by little, till I extinguish the glowing edge. I crush the ash-rimmed page into a ball and toss it. Then, scalpel in hand, I chop the mouse's tail and watch it separate, landing an inch apart from the body. It's a clean cut.

"April 17th," I say. We haven't talked about that mouse in years, but now I see her face turn green as it fills with the reminder. She runs out of the room to barf. The simple word "fine" fills my brain, and I suck on its bitterness, avoiding everybody's stares, gazing below at the thing Rachel opened, not me.

Mr. Marlowe reenters. He's the only teacher at St. Mary's who hates Rachel and me both, and maybe that's why he marches with such vigor now to our station, where he finds me alone and motionless by the body.

"What's going on here? You think you're on vacation? Do you realize your fate *dangles* in my hands?"

"We're on hiatus. My sister is hurling."

"Ruby, I don't care if your sister is hurling, or playing with her hair in there, or on some, on her way to..." His face gets redder. "I don't care if she's on Jupiter! If you're occupying this lab station, you have to be working."

“I’m squeamish.”

“Tough. We’ve got sixty-eight hours on these things before the god...before the GD safety review board says we gotta bag ’em and get ’em out. Stomach it. Come on, kiddo. It’s April already. You want to graduate, don’t you? Time to start thinking about the future.”

Stomach it I do—piercing that bulb of the mouse’s belly, ripping the heart out while the vessels around it snap with little *pings*—but I’m not thinking about the future.

2. June 18th

Our father stood fumbling with the camera when he tried to take our graduation photo. We stood arm in arm in those square hats. Rachel hadn’t thrown hers because she didn’t want to lose her honors tassel. I had nothing to lose but didn’t raise my arm in the gesture.

“Dad—” Rachel said.

“You have to remove the lens cap,” I told him.

Rachel’s hand around my shoulder gave my forearm a squeeze. The passing cars beeped their congratulations. Even then, in the instant before the shutter clicked, I could feel us poised on the edge of our separate lives; the photo’s in that frame over there but I could split it down the middle in my mind like a tapeworm because Rachel is going to be gone.

I make an old-fashioned with bitters at the counter like I've seen our father do, and I saunter back to our party in the yard. A light rain patters on the rental tent. The legs of my folding chair sink into the ground when I sit. Rachel, a table away, throws her head back laughing at somebody's joke, and our Polish nana grabs Rachel's hand and raises it—Nana's black curls and her arm fat shaking—and says in her singsong way, "Johns Hopkins on a scholarship, my granddaughter! And all those awards for her work on the school paper? I tell you, she's got energy to burn, this one. Takes after her mother."

And later, when we've already dumped out the coolers on the grass and taken down streamers, I occupy the last unfolded chair beneath the tent that still trickles water even though the rain has stopped. Our porch lights shine through a pinkening evening and almost through the bodies of gnats. I close my eyes. I don't take after Mom, remaining here after everyone is gone. In the afterimage of the porch lights, I see her light and try to soak it up. Maybe when everything around you becomes a reminder of where you've already been, it's best to move on.

Open. A breeze ruffles the tent's edges and bends the grass blades forward. Maybe, finally, I'll only be stuck with a loneliness like this: manageable, punctuated as it is by fireflies and the whizzing sounds of summer, which already feels gone. I'm thinking of sleeping out here underneath this very tent, at least for tonight, while the weather is still warm.

The Magenta Zone

Kelly's sister-in-law set down the plate in front of her. It made a definitive sound—something harder than a clink—on the Formica faux-wood surface. It carried a heap of spaghetti noodles coated in dark red sauce, thick with venison, and a slice of moist yellow garlic bread balanced on the plate's rim. This morning there had still been deer in the freezer. Kelly and Camille agreed it should be used up before one of their husbands shot another one. Now the meat spotted a tangled mess of noodles, which looked like cords, Kelly thought. Which looked umbilical.

All day she'd been plagued by useless impressions like these.

"I think you've outdone yourselves, ladies," her husband said, raising his fork.

"It was all Camille this time," Kelly said. And it had been.

Camille dismissed this, though she'd been the one to rise early to take the meat out to thaw. She'd chopped the tomatoes and onions and tossed them in a crock pot to stew all day. She was seven months pregnant but bustled through a narrow kitchen in little Keds while managing pots on each burner, always seeming to Kelly to have sprung from a page of *Ladies Home Journal* and into life. But Kelly

didn't feel the pity-coated envy she normally would. Camille had everything covered. She was relieved.

When they finished dinner, she surprised herself by jumping up to clear plates. A moment later, leaning against the counter's edge, she understood she'd only been seeking a moment to stand apart. Rick began gloating about the big doe they'd brought down that morning. Kelly ran the water and scrubbed plates. "Yes," they answered Camille, they would still go out hunting tomorrow. Adam had never brought home a trophy buck, and maybe this would be his year. If they had leftover meat, it could be doled out to the guys at work. Through the cloudy water, she could see a few spaghetti noodles wavering at the bottom of the drain catcher.

Then: detail after detail she didn't wish to hear. This morning Adam's bullet had *skimmed the bottom of the doe's belly*. But Rick delivered the blow through the neck that finally *brought the sucker down*. Her mind, she realized then, must possess valuable little holes like the ones of the strainer. Taking 911 calls all day at work, she necessarily let most details pass right through. It was only the most gruesome material that stuck and remained throughout those 12-hour shifts, and that could usually be disposed of with a couple hard shakes over some mental waste bin.

In the time she'd been standing at the sink, the window had darkened. She spotted her blackish eyes in the window, hovering over a dim snow bank that stretched on for miles. The four of them were isolated here, in their hunting cabin,

in a place that wasn't even a town: just a tiny oblong zone at the top of the Michigan mitten. Less than five hundred called it home. When they said they were going into "town," they meant a trip to the gas station that doubled as a drive-thru donut joint and tripled as a thrift store attempting to pass off 1970s condiment jars as "antiques." The township didn't appear on most consumer maps, and had it been part of the county where Kelly lived and worked, it would have appeared in magenta, indicating highest access difficulty. Here, if you had an emergency, the volunteer EMS crews traveled down dirt and gravel roads, taking upwards of forty minutes to reach you.

In the window, she saw the inside of the A-frame reflected as a clear picture. Her family at the dining room table on the left, then all the mismatched furniture that stuffed the wood-paneled front room. Multiple rockers. Glass table with gold legs. Full mantle of Florida souvenirs. It was a dumping ground of the past, but one you could stew in for a while, safely. Kelly and Rick had been coming here every opening weekend of deer hunting since they were kids. They inherited the cabin six years back and carried the tradition forth. Something about the light turning hour by hour over her dead parents' junk made Kelly feel like there could be time enough for anything. You spent the time differently, too: Rick and Adam up in the blinds stalking the snowy forest for any moving detail, Kelly and Camille chatting over preparations for slow-cooked meals. Then on the second night, the Saturday, they all climbed the winding stairs to the creepy little attic at the top of

the A-frame, and just as she'd done since she was a child, Kelly told everyone a ghost story.

What would she tell them this year? Lately after work, the tension in her gut didn't just fall away like it used to. Sometimes those exasperated callers' voices followed her home. Could she use it? Maybe that old refrain: *He's not breathing. She's not breathing.* She reached her arm through the water and nudged the strainer; the sink began to swallow the liquid in large gulps. Lately even the long past was refusing to stay put. She'd navigate a map and suddenly return to a mistake from a graveyard shift ten years ago, when, as a novice, she'd fumble an occasional direction and cost the paramedics minutes. And the longer-gone past surged up, too, when she'd receive, say, a domestic violence call, relayed in the usual euphemisms: "lashed out," "forced." Her mind wove back twenty years to a line of her father's speech that threatened to "put" her brother through a wall. "Put," as though it were as ordinary as a letter going into a mailbox. Her mind wove, she thought now, because it couldn't tell where the emergency was.

"Kelly?" Adam said. "Kelly?"

"Huh?" She turned to face him. He faced away, toward a stack of board games on the far shelves.

"Preferences on games. Scattergories..."

Rick threw his head back and groaned.

"Anything's fine with me," Kelly said.

“What’s wrong with Scattergories?” Camille asked.

“Sucks.”

“We’ve got Balderdash, Adverteasing, Trivial Pursuit...”

“Trivia,” Camille said.

The others agreed.

It was time to rejoin them. Time to turn and smile, wipe her damp hands on the thighs of her jeans, and go with some spring in her step back to the table, where she needed to join the conversation. She wasn’t usually so quiet. The sink was empty. Kelly lingered a moment to run the faucet on high, hoping she’d see the noodles at the bottom of the drain move together in quicker waves. But running the faucet on high just produced a disappointing blur of whiteness.

Looking up at the window that held a picture of the cabin interior and only a glimmer of the outside, she was suddenly struck by an urge to reach through the glass. She wanted something out there the way a child might want to wander into the woods to drink the snow. She cupped her hands around her eyes and peered, eagerly, beginning to discern the black shapes of trees, the dipping branches of firs: first the trees in a close ring around her, then the more distant ones. Her vision could go, staggering between bright points, pulsing farther and farther into the woods.

“Kelly!” Rick called. “Come join the party!”

Her eyes darted down to the noodles. The strainer was useless; the sink had a garbage disposal. She overturned the filter cup and banged it. She switched on the disposal, triggering the gunning sound, and it ate up the last bits.

They played a pop culture edition of Trivial Pursuit at the circular Formica table. The overhead lights were too bright. The bulbs had been replaced at four in the afternoon, and during the trivia game, everyone was still politely giving them a chance. In this light they talked about Janet Dickinson, Nads, and Heinz's fad invention of Easy Squirt Funky Purple Ketchup.

Rick rolled the die to green. Kelly drew a card to read. "On trial in 2005, what star was accused of giving minors wine that the defendant allegedly referred to as 'Jesus Juice?' "

"Michael Jackson!" Camille and Rick shouted. Hands banged on the table.

"Wacko Jacko," her brother added.

The couple sat across from each other, shadowy profiles in the weird light, and debated Michael Jackson's character, Rick offering accusations that he emphasized by clinking his Labatt can on the table, Camille playing devil's advocate. "He had a good heart," "Give me a break," "What about 'The Man in the Mirror?' " and on and on. Across the table, Adam shook his boyishly thick head of hair as he chuckled to himself, flipping the card back and forth to view all five question-and-answer pairs. The other faces, Kelly thought, would make more sense

on a movie screen. Not that they were suave. They weren't. But they were animated. They moved and acted like they were spouting lines of a script they knew well, and though Kelly should have gotten a copy of it, too, for whatever reason, it slipped past her.

"Mmm..." she offered now, though she didn't know to what. She often contributed only sounds like this, and nods, because she knew where to put them just from listening to tonal cues. It freed up her time for other thoughts. Lately, she'd had to redouble her efforts to focus at work. Expending her listening energies there, she found it made sense to autopilot through hours like these.

"Doesn't matter," Rick said, waving a hand in slow dismissal and watching it pass. He must have started drinking before dinner. They were still talking about Michael Jackson. "Doesn't matter who on this earth you *inspire*." He looked around the table, and his round, grey eyes widened a touch when they found Kelly. "Doesn't mean shit if you betray the people you're supposed to be caring for."

Kelly gathered that the trivia game was already over, the conversation having derailed to celebrity news, which it often did. They all got to spar with judgments that didn't cut too close to their lives.

"I have to agree that Michael Jackson betrayed his obligations toward the children in his care," Adam said.

"But we don't know that he *did* anything," Camille said.

“Oh, Cam,” Rick replied.

Kelly partly listened. It was strange to hear her brother talking like this—talking about a man’s role in the family as nurturing the way he might talk about a mother’s—but she supposed, given his involvement in his daughter’s Elise’s life, that he’d subscribed to a different model of fatherhood than the one they’d been raised with. He chaperoned trips, even helped with school projects, though growing up it had really only been during these annual weekends that Rick received attention from their father. And Rick told her they’d often been nearly silent in the hunting blinds, besides occasional hisses of advice about the deep way you had to listen to the woods to hear what would crawl out of it.

Their dad had wanted to pass on to Rick a sense of how to prey—not simply for meat—but through the space around him, which their father could skewer with his presence. Once, sloshed on rum and barking orders, he’d made Rick help him drag a bloody doe straight into the A-frame’s kitchen to show his wife and Kelly. That kind of surprise, combined with the occasional flying dish, kept the family on their toes, made them listen to the tenor of his footsteps, which would then determine the mood between their walls. As children, she and Rick had tried to crack his code of pleasure and displeasure so that they could predict him. Why did he never hug Rick, for instance, but sometimes Kelly? Had some aspect of her brother’s character failed, something he might compensate for with greater industry? He’d believed that at sixteen and worked every chance he got at the

corner market, eventually earning enough for a car. But when their father crashed it—crumpled the proud and peeling yellow body by running it into the side of a semi—he denied, even after sobering, that Rick had earned the car himself. They stopped attempting to decipher their father then. Their mother slipped Rick an envelope of cash to cover the damages, though Kelly to this day had never figured out how she secured the funds and kept them secret.

“Caretaker,” Kelly heard her brother say again. Strange: no one in her family would have used that word while Kelly was growing up, but it was one hundred percent clear that her mother was a caretaker, and it was one hundred percent clear that Camille was, too. She was in the kitchen now, buzzing around to refill drinks, even though she couldn’t drink herself because of the pregnancy.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that.” Kelly watched the red wine splash into her glass. The curve of Camille’s big belly showed in her peripheral vision. Camille was always thinking of others. Rick had married someone not unlike their mother. In the A-frame, Kelly often came out of the bedroom to see Camille faced away from her, tending to something in the kitchen, and it would feel like a double take of her mother at a younger age, standing there, browning white sugar to caramel over the stovetop for her Thanksgiving pies, which could take days to prepare. Ritual itself was like kneading your hands through dough, her mother used to say. The dough got to dictate how long it took and when it was done.

Maybe that was why Kelly’s job could get to her. It had always

appealed to her that a dispatcher could provide first-aid directions, reaching out to the caller in that strange waiting period, stretching out the lifeline that just might deliver someone from misfortune. Yet the reaching took time, and these days, she had to process calls faster and faster to avoid a lay-off. Kelly hardly ever got to treat anything like dough.

And sometimes—pour in all the time she wanted—her investments didn't return. Her care could be invisible to others, namely Adam's mother-in-law Jeanine, who was suffering progressive dementia in its early phases and had occupied their home for the past three months. But no one ever said the word "dementia." Kelly tip-toed around Jeanine's self-denial in respect for her husband's wishes. But in the stories they told themselves, in which Jeanine was merely a houseguest, where was the time Kelly spent running the errands Jeanine couldn't run herself, driving her to the doctor's, teaching her to use the voicemail time and time again, or walking, feeding, and picking up shit in a baggie behind Jeanine's constantly yapping cockapoo? Kelly wanted to slough it all off so she could feel like the bigger person. But her mother-in-law could make *her* feel like the intruder. She was always coming to Kelly with her broad unhappiness, veiled in little quibbles. She was paranoid, for instance, about her toiletries being stolen, and last week approached Kelly about compiling an official inventory of their separate items (of which there was some overlap, hers and Kelly's Goody brand fine-tooth combs, for instance) and posting it somewhere, perhaps on the fridge. When Kelly

refused, Jeanine looked up from under her brow with something worse than suspicion. It was a reminder that she was married to Jeanine's Adam. It was a warning that she hadn't solidified her place. Adam called these traits of his mother's "quirks" and "pet peeves," and Kelly tried to view them like this, too. But Jeanine was always sprouting more pet peeves, like porcupine bristles, and sometimes Kelly wanted to flick those bristles.

She raised her head to meet Adam's boyish face. He was angled, chin in hand, listening to Camille and Rick discuss the baby's due date. Was it her imagination, or had his cheeks not come entirely unswollen after a recent wisdom tooth removal, lending him a chipmunk quality that made him look even more blameless? This soft-cheeked, neutral expression was also his TV-watching face. Evenings in their living room in front of the television, Kelly would notice Jeanine wince as she tried to move her knees over the ottoman. She'd wonder when she might fit in a trip to the doctor for Jeanine, or if she had remembered to call in all the refills for Jeanine's prescriptions. She would then look at Adam—shoveling popcorn through his innocent, peachy lips—and wonder if to him it were as though his mother had simply parachuted down from the sky to join them on evenings like these. Since she was willing enough to watch the same programs, he must have assumed he might as well not do anything differently.

But Kelly tried to release these minor tensions when she and Adam presented themselves as a couple. The concept of a "united front" had been

ingrained in her. She looked at Rick now, who had risen from his chair and stood behind Camille in a display of his affection she hadn't seen since Camille was pregnant the last time. His arms wrapped around her belly, and the two of them swayed a little together as he spoke into her ear.

"Sorry." Camille offered them a mildly embarrassed smile, and reached her fingers over her shoulder to pat Rick's hand.

"Not at all," Adam said.

The picture of the two of them made Kelly long a little. Yet their warm feelings now seemed partly ritual, too—the sweet swell of it like the top of something baking—and if that were true, their feelings might have inevitable limits as the child grew. Rick had started drinking heavily, Kelly remembered, by the time Elise was two. He stared at her inexactly at times, claiming she gave him a headache in her learning to walk. She stumbled in every imaginable path across the carpet, sometimes raising her arms and crying out, sometimes accidentally knocking the furniture. Rick was saying "I love you" in Camille's ear now, as he seemed to be doing daily these days, and the two of them continued moving together like a pendulum.

"So May twenty-third," Adam said. "Will you be wanting visitors in the hospital?"

"You bet, Adam. We want everybody there. Balloons. Whole shebang. Re-do of last time."

“What was wrong with last time, sweetie?”

“Well, I suppose it was OK for you,” Rick said. Kelly rolled her eyes. “But you remember what a mess my Dad was, the bastard, had the DUI stuff going on...how long did it take him to even visit us at home? Three months, at least. And he didn’t even know Elise’s name by then.”

“From everything I’ve heard from you and Kelly, it seems like it was best when he wasn’t around,” Adam said.

“You know, you’re right, Adam. And still I think it’s a shame our kids don’t have a grandfather. And for all the shit we talk about our father, Kelly especially...just kidding, Kel! Just makin’ sure you’re awake. He wasn’t all bad. He took good care of Mom. Always kept her happy. Put away money so she’d be alright in those few years after he passed—”

“You think Mom was happy?”

“Well, look who joined the conversation!” He exaggerated the motion of turning to look at her. She felt her teeth set on edge and was surprised to feel them that way.

“Be nice,” Camille said, patting his arm, then took a seat at the table.

Rick remained standing. “I’m always nice. What were you saying, Kelly? I’d love to hear your perspective.”

“Fuck off.”

“No, tell me all the deep psychological shit I’ve been missing. Because I’m shallow, right? Since I actually enjoy my life?”

“Rick.”

“It’s fine, Camille. Rick, all I’m saying is that Mom didn’t live like Pollyanna, and I don’t think we should pretend just because she’s dead now and didn’t say very much to anyone before that.”

“Jesus.”

She saw Adam frown, too.

“You’re off your rocker, you know that?” He got closer to her face. His right arm, extended at his side, pointed to the countertops in the kitchen. “You remember those pecan turtles she used to make when we were here, how they covered the whole counter? She brought *everyone* joy. She was overflowing with it.”

Kelly saw Camille raise her eyes a little at the word “overflowing” and instinctively turned to her. But Camille darted her eyes away, and Kelly kept turning toward the kitchen, where indeed she could picture everything crawling with cookies and color from the holiday baking her mother did here annually: mixing, spreading, sprinkling, singing to herself.

“That was one weekend a year, Rick. Her life didn’t have to be all shit work, but it was, and she had a tiny little space to make something she cared about once a year when Dad was off on a killing rampage.”

“Killing rampage,” Camille repeated. She shook her head, then looked at Kelly, frowning. “Is that really what you see our husbands as doing?”

“Look, I know we’re talking about deer, okay? I’m just saying there’s a certain masculine...I don’t know...energy that’s very different from—”

Rick pretended to gag on his laughter.

“I have to agree that’s a little extreme, Kelly. In fact, I have to point out that given overpopulation—”

“Okay, who wants cake?” Camille asked. They all turned to stare at her, standing frantically in the kitchen.

“What?” Rick said.

“We’re changing the subject. We’re here for a harmonious weekend.” She looked at Kelly, and said in seeming apology, “Some people might not be well equipped to have this discussion right now.” She tilted her head to point at Rick, who was peeling back the tab on another beer.

“Fine by me,” Rick said, sliding back into his chair. “I’ll take some cake, babe.”

Kelly tried to read Adam’s face, which had simply blankened again as though he were watching any television program. He saw her looking at him and startled, moving his hand out from under his chin and repositioning himself in the chair. “Need some more wine, sweetheart?”

“No. No, I think I’ll be okay.”

She'd been so wordlessly frustrated with him. Lately, especially with the stress of Jeanine, she'd begun to reverse toilet paper rolls. He expected them one way—with the dangling square hanging over the front, as though that equaled propriety—and she simply wanted the power to perturb his tranquil face, to unsettle his universe a touch. Camille came near with a two-tiered chocolate cake. The glass platter clinked on the Formica. It occurred to Kelly that both a marriage and a joke were largely matters of timing.

“Kelly? Cake?”

Camille smiled, and just little hints of her crow's feet wrinkles showed. She tossed a pile of light brown hair out of her way as she sliced the cake with a big, bright knife. In the white light, Kelly could see Adam's stubble, Rick's pores, and every stroke of the knife on the cake's chocolate frosting.

“Looks beautiful, Camille. I'll have just a little piece.”

“You've got it. And...” She set down a plate before Kelly. “Speaking of little ones. I've been meaning to tell you that Elise has been on my case about wanting cousins.” Camille smiled and slugged her shoulder. Kelly tried not to visibly recoil. “Rick and I have been speculating.” Her eyes stared at expectantly. “When are we going to hear some good news already?”

Camille was corny. Kelly hated to use that word, but there it was. And here were Adam's eyes, expectant, too, just waiting to see what Kelly would say, though she was attempting to look at him meaningfully, suggesting that he should help her

volley this ball. He didn't. She looked at Rick, who stared, too, and she saw how his face was flushed from drinking now, flushed with the blood they shared. All the faces at the table had their eyes on Kelly.

Her throat almost gagged on the cake. She covered her mouth with a napkin. "Excuse me." *A child?* she thought, or heard herself think. *How could it come from you? There's not even a Kelly in here. You're empty.*

"Actually, with work being so busy, we thought it might be best to put off—"

"Work shmirk. Clock's a tickin.'" Rick tapped his Labatt can twice.

"Oh, Kelly, you'd love having a kid. It's so rewarding. And you're Elise's favorite aunt, though I'm sure I'm not telling you anything you don't already know."

She managed a polite smile.

"Hon?" Adam said. "You're pale. Do you need water?"

Rick glanced at her face and let a little air out of his nose. "Relax, Kel, no one's *pressuring* you." He shook both hands and widened his eyes in a mock-scare.

"Rick."

"I've just been getting dehydrated lately. It's no big deal. Just have to drink Gatorade." She let out a nervous laugh.

Camille rose to get the water. "Here, sweetie. No Gatorade in the fridge, unfortunately."

She felt tense, gulping the water with Camille's hand on her shoulder, and she fought the urge to shake it off. She caught her reflection in the kitchen window again. She drank quickly and then set down her water glass, empty.

"More?"

She shook her head.

The night before, Kelly had not walked into that expansive black outside the window, but she'd lain cloaked in it, curled tight in a ball away from Adam. Today she slept past noon, resisting a sun that was brighter than usual for November. When she finally spread her limbs, they ached with the untwisting, so much that as Camille sat crocheting in the cabin's front room, she decided to go out walking for as long as it took to feel a different way.

Outside now, as the temperature hovered below freezing, the crisp layer at the top of the snow banks softened. She got to crack it herself, her heels printing half circles into the snow as she mounted a hill. At the top it was clear that the world was becoming ragged. The light, filtered through rows of clouds, crossed her face in stripes. Looking out at the fields below, she saw yellow weeds poking through the snow in patches. She saw a stand of trees with peg limbs, and from this distance they looked the gray of vacuum cleaner fuzz, or of a long accumulated hairball. She felt time stretch before her on the edge of the hill, where her rising

breath told her she was on the cusp of something. She wondered how time felt on the other side, when you'd fallen over the edge.

Then she thought of Jeanine, who was not at home, but away on a van trip with friends up through Wisconsin and across Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Secretly, Kelly had taken off work on the day Jeanine left, this past Thursday, to rest alone in the house for once in a peace and quiet punctured only at intervals by Jeanine's cockapoo, which Kelly eventually locked inside the bathroom. But she did phone into work that day. She called to ask her coworkers to scan Jeanine's travel routes through the system, wanted to know if Jeanine might pass through any magenta zones.

"You're not worried about that, are you?" They all thought her concern was sweet. They reported she would pass through many areas of highest access difficulty and offered the usual details: the low populations, volunteer EMS crews, and shitty Level 4 hospitals that inevitably escalated death risks. Of course, it was only a coding system. There was no reason to believe anything would go wrong, so Kelly shouldn't worry.

They were right. Kelly knew there was no reason to believe that her mother-in-law would slip through a magenta zone as though through the lining of a coat pocket, then fall into a sea of wool or down feathers, where she'd be too difficult to find. There was no reason to imagine the remoteness might swallow her

up and keep her, as it had so many. And though it was disgraceful to fantasize like this, Kelly had lain on the couch envisioning a peninsula splashed in magenta.

She turned and descended the hill, pressing her palms against the pines and drinking their spacious shadows as she went. She walked through snow banks and down to a rushing creek, where you could hear ice chunks breaking under the warmth of today's sun, dot-dotting like bullets as they cracked. She thought of how those broken-off pieces gave themselves away to a larger body of water, and she walked on and on, meandering almost dizzily.

She thought of Adam, and when she played him over in her mind there was one image she returned to: Adam on stage by the mike at the grand opening, last summer, for the car dealership he managed. The owner had asked him to emcee the public event. Among those long rows of identical cars and pendant flags, she watched him run up to the stage, over and over, for those little lines of filler between the local bands and the sales reps announcing special offers. Then she'd watched from a distance as he moved through the crowd, chit-chatting with old women and twisting silver balloon trucks for children. Her husband was personable.

Kelly's bowels had twisted then, as though the large and small intestines were about to engage in a boxing match. Emotions that had always mocked each other from afar suddenly jumped in the ring. Dissatisfaction, guilt for feeling it, and the soft feathered edges of her desire for something else—what, she didn't

know—began to tangle, twisting into the ball that had remained lodged inside her these months. Kelly knew she couldn't stay wound up forever. Eventually her limbs had to open and burst, and when she found herself on another hill, she stopped and looked up to observe the sun at its highest. Ice-coated branches above dripped plump drops of water on her cold scalp.

She continued through the snow banks. Now she saw lines: imagined the nets of blue stitches dangling from Camille's crochet hook, returned to the crosshatchings of laser lines on the dispatching maps. She remembered, even, the hot air balloon strapped to the roof of Adam's dealership that read, "Honda Grand Opening! Lease or Buy Today!" There had been ropes that tied it there and kept it from rising. Maybe, she thought, she could in some ways snap the ropes that had always tied her. She could recognize that she *once* admired Adam without trying, but did no longer, that her love for him existed in *memory*, that the *real* had finally pinned down the *should be*, and in doing so, she watched her old illusions and cares rise like smoke. She felt light.

If the ropes had been lifelines, then perhaps she could permit herself, too, to further imagine the entering of magenta zones. As she did, it occurred to her that in not keeping track of her location today, she had also neglected to note her proximity to the deer blinds.

From the sun she could tell it was about four in the afternoon. Her husband and brother were likely still hunting. Somewhere they sat side by side with loaded

barrels. It was unlikely, of course—on 16 acres and with several deer blinds to choose from—that they were proximal at all, and there was therefore no need to worry. It was a fairly bright day, and perhaps even in her tan winter coat, Rick and Adam would be able to distinguish her body from an animal's.

Walking with the knowledge of gunners above her, Kelly felt the vulnerability of her exterior. Stray bullets could cross this sky, and as she walked she was dipping her whole body in danger. She thought about what it would be to slip through a pocket. It would be a headlong rush through sun and snow and pines until you reached the deep black, which had to be expansive. Ice still snapped in the creek, which sang a song of death sweeter than anything else she knew. She followed it down, knowing the creek curved back to the house eventually. She'd take that route to the A-frame as the sun lowered. She'd walk calmly and leisurely through this air, as fresh as any she'd ever tasted.

At dusk, Kelly found herself nearing the house. She came upon the backs of Adam, Rick, and Camille in the open garage. Had she wished to see them, missed them even? For some reason, they seemed bright points in her vision, and her eyes moved between their heads. Fluorescent light filled the garage: a prism of beige walls with a few canoes hanging overhead. Kelly approached the three of them and stood next to Camille.

Before them lay a doe, like so many others Kelly had seen. Eyes of black marble: open. Feathered white edges of a tail, a flag, that stood erect, meaning

she'd died while trying to warn other deer of the danger. Her four peg legs crossed awfully, like pick-up sticks, and the body was splashed across the chest with blood.

"She's a beauty," Camille said. Her voice echoed.

"She really is a gorgeous one," Adam said.

In the corner was another.

Her husband grabbed the back legs, her brother took the front, and they stepped closer to the center and lifted the doe a foot and a half off the ground. They swung her back to gain momentum, then tossed the body forward so it fell gently into place next to the doe they killed yesterday.

"Oh hey, Kel," Camille said. "I didn't even know you were here."

"I just got in a second ago."

Adam smiled at Kelly to acknowledge her, then wiped his hands against each other to clear the debris and demonstrate why he couldn't touch her.

"Well. Shall we? Drinks?" Camille said. The three of them started walking.

"Kelly, are you coming?" Adam asked.

"Where?"

"In the house...Camille just said that." His eyebrows were raised. "Where were you anyway?"

"Out. I'm going to stay here a second."

Rick let out a long whistle. "Okie doke..."

The garage door remained open. Darkness had now fallen at her back. She looked at the illuminated deer, whose two bodies already suggested a longer line. The head of the first doe butted up against the belly of the second. Between the pair of them, there were three red wounds radiating outward: one on a chest, one on a belly, one through a neck. There was one place where the does' hooves crossed.

She noticed the way the scarlet depth of the holes penetrated the bodies, having cut through the living organs to stop the deer in their bounding tracks. The holes had not enveloped or absorbed with any kind of peace, not as her mind did now: straining to see, swelling to accommodate a whole picture of the bodies.

It was time to climb the winding stairs, like they had always done. Adam was walking behind her, and Kelly remembered doing this barefoot in the summer, eight years old. She would take step after step up the spiral, then, her father behind her in the spot where Adam now stood. The little metal pie-shaped steps would feel gritty with tracked-in sand. At the top of the staircase, Kelly pulled aside a fleece blanket that served as a curtain and bunched it behind a hook. She held before her a fat, flickering candle and lit the way down the long floorboards. Old mattresses lined each side of the attic in two neat rows, just as it had been as long as she could remember, when her parents entertained their siblings here and

Kelly's cousins filled the attic. This had been their space even as children, and it had always been the site of the ghost stories.

She and her husband sat on a clean-looking mattress in the center of the room. Her brother and his wife took the next one, covered with a thinning white sheet. Kelly set the candle between them.

"Ready for this one?" she smiled. What she felt in her chest surprised her: excitement. She told them her story this year was the tale of tired pilot flying deep into the woods. He was so tired he was almost dreaming with his eyes open.

"Into the magenta zones?" asked Rick.

She nodded. "Good memory."

"Now you've revealed your inspiration. Just don't give us any of the real gnarly shit, okay?" Rick chuckled.

She said she'd do her best. She described how the pilot's passage was not a smooth one. It seemed a storm was coming, as everything wavered in his view: the darkness, the trees that looked like human forms, the pictures of the past that surged and flashed—a childhood thunderstorm, a jump rope, a fence, a scar—often appearing in the windshield with more clarity and depth than the forest around them.

The storm that was coming would shake the forest down to its last leaf. Though the pilot's hands gripped the wheel, in no other way was he truly driving. He was, at turns, too exhausted or too terrified to keep his vigil. He didn't know

whether he'd be delivered or swallowed up. Adam had his eyebrows raised as he watched her from the side, though she didn't know what he saw.

Kelly described what the pilot saw the next time his eyes opened. There to his right in the co-pilot chair was a twin of himself, identical in size and shape, though somehow less substantial. The ghost twin's skin was see-through enough to let you know there was nothing under it. The pilot could see through him to the rain that crossed the window in slow, sideways strokes.

Camille gazed at a nothing point, held rapt, and shivered when Kelly described the translucence of the skin. Then she looked up at Kelly with eyes that held a question. Rick sat content, took a pull of his beer. Some part of her wanted to reach him most but feared he'd be the hardest, that he sat the farthest, despite all their shared years.

The pilot would need a strength he'd never had for the passage ahead, she told them, but because his muscles ached in pulls and his head throbbed with the flashes, he decided to cut a deal: to let his calm twin ghost take the pilot seat for a while. And at first, letting go of the reins allowed him a sweet sleep, so deep that the tumult of the plane as the storm picked up merely rocked him like a lullaby. Sleep-flying was freedom from flying the old way—always straight—eyes ahead on the gauges.

Yet after a little rest, the pilot started becoming conscious and woke to a white fog that prevented his view of almost everything, including the sea of black

trees he hoped still existed below. Only the drops in his stomach and jiggles of his brain in his skull let him know how the plane was moving: weaving, nose-diving nearly, recovering barely, and smacking hard against air currents. White fog eclipsed his view of the wing of the plane. Sometimes the fog obscured all but the darkest seams of the wing, which would flash skeletal as though under an X-ray. Other times, the fog swallowed the wings whole, and he had to imagine them still there—invisible but still cutting—as he floated in what seemed a dismembered capsule.

Suddenly he wanted the reins back. “Let me land this thing!” the pilot shouted. “You’re not qualified to fly!”

But the ghost-twin didn’t give up easily. “Qualified? Qualified?” mocked the ghost, who pointed to the notes of panic in the man’s voice. She screwed up her face in contempt as the ghost-twin would do when it looked at the struggling pilot. “You’re hysterical,” Kelly spat. “You can’t fly. You’re a wreck.”

Everyone looked a little scared, Camille’s eyes widening and Adam now frowning at the floor. She went on, told them how the ghost’s smooth shell whispered promises of the bright side, said it was possibly on the other side of the clouds. Indeed the pilot hoped he’d see, at least once more, the canopy of trees and the white, unfettered stars. That was before he knew the storm held the plane in its eye.

“You remember when we were out picking apples last year?” Kelly stopped to ask them. She placed a hand on Adam’s knee and looked into all their eyes.

“When we saw that falcon swoop down for that big orange cat? You remember the way the falcon’s talons pierced him?”

“I remember.”

“Yes.”

She said that was how the storm held the plane. With teeth clenched down that tight so they could only dance together—predator and prey—as they lurched and twisted and fell. The tail of the plane stabbed the ground again and again, smashing it, but when it finally stopped, still alive in the cabin sat the man and his twin-ghost man, although it was difficult to breathe.

“You’ve heard that advice—on a passenger plane, they say it every time you fly—that parents *must* strap on their oxygen masks and get them working before they tend to their kids?” Everyone agreed they had heard it. “It’s not a lie. You don’t know how much time you have. You don’t know if you’re just going to pass out in the middle of strapping that oxygen mask on your kid.”

The ghost wasn’t made of the same material as the man, she explained. He leaked oxygen, and it took much more to keep him alive. He’d been sucking the air from the chamber all along and now there wasn’t much left; the man couldn’t even lift his limbs to reach for the mask. As the ghost strapped on his own mask, he offered an apologetic shrug toward the pilot. Getting your air sucked out, Kelly

told them, felt just like seeing your wide view shrink—close tight with darkness—so you had only a pinhole of light to look through, and it became hard to perceive anything. She felt her voice quaver in her throat, had to stop to breathe to ensure her next words would be steady. She looked into their eyes and saw how she had them at their attention—held them—like she hadn't in so long.

“The man died staring at an EXIT sign he couldn't crawl to. And what he wondered...His last wonder was if the ghost would survive and keep piloting the plane. If the ghost would pass for the man in the world and make all the right moves. If people would notice.”

There was a pause. They all realized that was the end.

“I liked it, Kelly,” Camille said. “Nice touch with the disappearing wings.”

“Yeah, good story,” Adam said. “Maybe my favorite from you.” She tried to read his face now, which seemed sincere.

Rick patted her back. “Deep stuff there, Kel. She's a master of metaphor, my sister!”

Kelly thanked him. She wasn't sure what she'd wanted in the telling, but it wasn't quite this. The three of them receded in her vision, if only slightly, blurring into those movie-like faces they'd been at dinner.

Rick and Camille said “good night,” then passed through the attic's doorway.

“Ready for bed?” Adam said.

“In a minute. Meet you down there?”

He paused, as though on the edge of something he might say. Then he leaned in to peck her on the lips. “Good night.”

She picked up the candle and walked down the narrow attic to the curtainless window on the far wall. She cupped her hands around her eyes to peer through the pane. Looking out, she understood what she’d wanted: to crack all her listeners’ shells, cleanly, like the thin frozen layer at the top of the snow. And there underneath would be the softness. But maybe reaching underneath wasn’t clean. Wasn’t like reaching into snow at all.

Maybe it was more like gutting a body, and that’s why people did it seldom, alone, reluctantly. Maybe—if you had let your underneath portions wrestle and fight and die and rot—you would have to reach your arm through your mouth and snake it downward as though through a drain to scrape out the whole mess. Maybe the gunk you pulled up in handfuls, dripping, didn’t hold any luminous promise. Kelly tried to remind herself of that.

But she did hope. She hoped that in emptying out she could actually become more substantial. She’d devote the care of a midwife to reaching inside and swabbing to scrape out the old stories, which had lodged inside her long ago like things miscarried. She’d allow herself to feel them, finally: moist, grotesque, familiar. Then she’d push like a mother to deliver for the world their ghosts.

Slipping

1.

Keeping a clean house can become a virtue. Like keeping her bat caves clean so her Mama and Aunt Rosa and her little cousins don't see the powder stuck up in them, just hanging around in her nose hairs. And maybe it's better to never do messy things in the first place: never crush burnt Aunt Rosa's painkillers over a mirror, or interpret the doctor's orders unfaithfully so her aunt expects less pills, but what can Edie say? She knows the magic words. And Magda in the locker room today—the nerve—said, "Sure this is OK, girl? You don't feel a little...I don't know, guilty?" then laughed. So Edie told Sammy and Magda: "Guilt...you just have to relax with it, chicas, just hold it in your mouth for a second like a tongue depressor at the doctor's, or *la pena*"(they giggled). "Relax, and you don't have to gag on it."

Edie faces a full cabinet. Bottles line every silver shelf. Prescription pills—round red ones, oval orange ones, clear capsules with blue beads inside—climb up the inside of every amber bottle.

Oxy.

And to think she was only looking for Nyquil.

She shuts the cabinet, sees herself breathing harder on the mirrored door, and runs a hand beneath the faucet's stream. She doesn't want to return to these lies and secrets; she told herself, earlier today, she'd give it all up. Sometimes the guilt floats back like a drowned thing, like when she fishes a knife from the drawer to cut the pills and her head sings a line of refrain like the goose girl's: "If your mother could see you now, her heart would break in two." But she goes ahead and bisects the pills, remembering her guilt is in rhythm with the world's: world of steely structures that leak their poisons directly into rivers.

At night on the black Potomac, she has seen her grandmother glitter back into being, shaking a finger, warning her never to jump for the silver fish that pass like glass slippers, for their bodies are full of mercury. Perhaps because this grandmother, in her day, mixed the potions that threw away children, or because her Mama crossed the border by night with Edie on her back, changing both their names, the girl who is called mostly Edie believes everyone has something to flush. Everyone: not just the soulless chemical plant where strips of Aunt Rosa's skin died and had to be sliced off. "Because she was undocumented," her mother said, "The bosses didn't have to pay to remove my sister's skin and uterus. But they did pay: hush money."

White powder can burn when it travels up you. White light can flash in the mirrored tray that passes beneath the restroom stall and into your palms. She sniffed with Magda and Sammy before gym class today, then walked though the

chlorine vapors to the edge of the diving board, sprung, and relished the instants of falling before the immersion. Her laps across the blue expanse had been the slowest in the class, but she didn't feel self-conscious then, or later in the shower, or later, walking into math class late with wet hair and no foundation.

"Mantente fuerte," Edie thinks. "No more of this." She wipes her face on her sleeve and turns off the light, and her hand slips, barely touching the dustless rail, as she goes down the stairs. Since her aunt's accident, she has cleaned the house to help out, and she's kept it immaculate. She's proud of the head on her shoulders that always whispers the right thing to do. Her head jerks around, without her really meaning it to, and she sees white powder aligning, forming a cobweb that stretches from the back of the bathroom door. It drifts nearer and sticks to Edie's chest, but it doesn't pull her back there.

2.

Keeping a clean house is a virtue, and Edie reminds herself of this when she opens the closet to the shelves of Lysol, rags, gloves. The old hardwood floor is intricately cracked, and though she won't be able to make it shine, she'll empty its wounds and ravines of dust. Edie's mother is precise like she is. Working nights at a Laundromat, washing stains off the white people's clothes, she hums the measured tunes that add up to an even shift, so she can always tell the time.

Those lullabies her mother sang years ago must have inflected her moments with Richard, by the river and under a rising moon, when she felt herself fill with the wish to unravel and be revealed. But she stayed wound up in gauze like her Mama taught her, with an eye on the big picture—alert—and with a sense of where North was, if they ever had to run.

But she did let him kiss her neck. And her mother had warned against this, too. That was the first way she slipped.

The second—crushed pills aside—was telling him so much, even trying to describe how it felt to her to teeter on the border of something and lose her footing. How when she falls, she sees the solace of a still, glass surface of water and imagines it breaking. How her skull seems to widen out, like a dancer's dress or a fish's fin. "Knowledge can beguile them," her mother always said. "Don't be dangerous." But Edie had gone on telling, even asked if he'd read "The Little Mermaid"—and the real story, not the jacked-up Disney version—where the mermaid dies in the end and in trippy sea creature Heaven opens her eyes and asks, "Towards where am I floating?"

Later, when Richard skipped stones along the river and they ran ahead of each other in spurts, hiding behind trees at turns, she could ask, "Towards where am I floating?" and they'd read enough of the book together that he would call back, "Towards the daughters of the air!"

She opens the window a crack to air out the cleaning vapors. Sometimes, even in the apartment, it still feels that something—a finger, a vine, a handcuff—could coil around her arm and drag her through a hole in one of her mother’s stories, in which people—found by the men and the dogs and not knowing the correct password—could get “disappeared” and never be heard from.

So the third way Edie did not—not even once—slip with Richard was to say, “Call me Elena. I want you to know my real name,” even as he faced her on the bridge and told her he was paperless. Beneath a moon that shone crisply over everyone’s heads, she wished they could claim a little patch of earth to stand on, and her voice crept to the knife’s edge of speech in that moment, but she kept it from spilling.

3.

How does it feel to drop vertically? When the cleaning is done, she faces the original cabinet, where the light traces her cheekbones. She could open the door to the brightly colored pills and the white ones. She could crush the flat faces of the tablets by rocking a knife over them. Looking into her reflection, she tries to remember going far, as far as she’s gone, her body into water, disappearing, gliding, then opening her limbs and eyes to the underwater, and how it seemed limitless, blue, sacred, and there was nothing left to consider. It was blindness as well as sight—swimming—and she wants to tell Richard this soon, the next time she sees

him. She doesn't know how many pills her right hand fishes out of the cabinet before her other hand swats the door shut.

Softening

Caitlyn,

I think you and I are going to have to do the work of rebuilding the world. Imagine us standing on a third story terrace surrounded by sycamores peeling in the sun while the blached sky tears back like wrapping paper, revealing an underside. Imagine if *we* started tearing at it. Watch those skyline fires we've seen coming since our first dreams, lying close in caves, together with men, our bodies still unshaven.

I'm hard of smelling but I have loved, always, what I could pick up of your scent: a lustrous sweat, of gold, probably, like light on an ocean wave. Think of all it encompasses: plankton, oxygen, purity, metal. I wanted to take you in, but I was scared, and that's why we slipped beneath a concrete staircase, continuing to breathe the polluted air.

I turned my head in that air and saw far out there, through the lot of glass shards and burnt grass, up to the wall of Detroit's old Packard Plant, where fat, spray-painted letters the color of lime spelled out "SQUEEZE." A street couple who'd been sitting against the wall stood and moved on. In the wind, their plastic bags rippled like two electrified dogs. It was getting chilly; you had to be going. I

turned to your eye freckle, and after all that time, we touched. I felt the sharpest pull, like someone was tugging on rope again and again. And again till it started to hurt. I know now that this is longing.

Remember us standing on the verge of goodbye, still crunching glass beneath our tennis shoes? I had wondered if my heart could pulse through and out of my chest. Then I tried to picture it: the initial wiggle, the organ departing from the veins, and how would it look when the air touched it? Would it change from blue to red like blood? Would it bounce or splat on the pavement, and would the rest of me feel it?

You left me standing on the silver trash by my old apartment, having told me I was too “inhibited.” You used that word. I know how I must have looked when you first moved your hands: rigid, fearful, and perhaps you assumed that I’m incapable of softening.

If I could relive that night, I’d change nothing except to have said to you, “Caity, take a look around.” You should have understood that if my heart slipped out in that lot, in that city, there was no telling what it might have been capable of.

Two years later and I hardly know you, but I still think from time to time of the things we said when we talked about rebuilding the world. How much would have to dissolve before we could even get started. I’d still like to hold your hand as the fire wavers on the skyline, making the old shapes crumble. How the

chain link would twist, the columns topple, and the towers unpierce the sky until everything is ash, everything softening like it's supposed to.