

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: SEA WAR AND OTHER STORIES

Emily K. Lyons, Master of Fine Arts, 2013

Thesis directed by: Professor Maud Casey,
Department of English

The narratives in *Sea War and Other Stories* follow characters battling for, and against, their own freedom to act. Some (Sean in “The Believer,” Lizzy in “The Summer Queen”) find relief in self-made cages, doggedly following behind other characters who seem to know exactly what they want. Others (Brian in “Elijah,” Irene in “Passenger,” Dorie in “Raven”) feel cornered by their own decisions. They struggle to navigate social situations after realizing their predicaments have been shaped by feelings of insecurity rather than goals. And others (Ellen in “Come Down to the Water,” Eileen in “New Weather,” and the narrator in “Sea War”) see their abilities and ideals falter to forces beyond their control while in pursuit of noble ends.

SEA WAR AND OTHER STORIES

by

Emily K. Lyons

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2013

Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair
Professor Howard Norman
Professor Emily Mitchell

©Copyright by

Emily K. Lyons

2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Believer	1
Elijah	10
Passenger	22
Raven	38
The Summer Queen	61
Come Down to the Water	75
New Weather	99
Sea War	112

The Believer

When I first noticed Ronna, I mean *really* noticed something unusual about her, she was polishing pint glasses with a white rag, standing a little ways down the bar from me. We worked together there. She didn't look like other women I knew; her looks had first registered to me as plain and uncultivated. But when I looked over at her that night – her soft skin, her strange angles – she possessed the distant brightness of a star. She wasn't looking up at me, or in my general vicinity, or at anyone else, and she wasn't looking down at her work, which moved quickly and mechanically. She looked absent from the room. Her eyes seemed to be clouded with a candied mist.

It wasn't planned. We both worked the closing shift. We walked to the subway in silence and rode the same train. My eyes were fixed on her, but if she was aware of me, she didn't show it. When she got off at her stop, I went too, compulsively, as if being tugged forward by a rope. I didn't bother ducking around corners or keeping distance to avoid her notice. I wanted to better see her unfamiliar light, to be near her and to stay. Two minutes after she let herself into her apartment, I buzzed up.

“Yeah?”

“Ronna? It's Sean.”

Quiet.

“From work?”

Quiet. I pictured her thinking, figuring out that I had followed her and considering what that might mean. Just a co-worker to her then, a name she barely knew. The lock unlatched loudly and I pulled open the door and walked up to 3L. She'd opened her door

a sliver for me and I pushed it. The entry hall was the color that seemed to fall over her eyes at the bar – the color of twilight, day and night trading sides. The place smelled like popcorn. Through the hall, a single room with unshaded windows was attached to a tiny corner kitchen. There was no television in the room. She had positioned herself to face the window, observing the streets from the sofa in a dark blue slip, crunching white buds in her small white teeth.

She barely looked at me and I didn't mind. She had allowed me in. "It's okay," she said, patting the space beside her on the couch. I sat.

We shared the popcorn. I followed her lead. We didn't talk; I understood this immediately. Our eyes were at work. We watched the streets all night. Once I adjusted to the pace of small human events occurring on their own time, unaware of their significance, the miniature dramas began to unfold before us like an opera. Police cars and fire trucks coming and going, the blues and reds of their lights splashing across the walls, lacy and vivid. Lights going on, lights going off. Couples fighting or kissing on their ways home from long nights out. An old woman crouching behind a fencepost to pee. A young man slapping a younger woman and then both parties collapsing to the ground, laughing. Drug buys, dates ending, dates continuing, several almost-fights. A limp bouquet of pink balloons descending from the sky and hovering just above the sidewalk, its ribbons grazing the ground. We watched morning arrive, first a hesitating gold line in the distance that finally charged into the room, delivering me the courage to approach her body.

Our intimacy was instinctive. It felt right. Each move, each turn of my body, felt surer than the one that came before. As I sank further inside her, options were being

removed, and with them, the pressures of decision-making, of being confounded by freedom, of wondering what great force I would devote my dissolving days to.

I said to her afterwards, "I love you."

"How do you know?"

"Because I feel it." I traced a line down her cheek.

"I do too," she said, the whites of her eyes growing huge. It wasn't clear whether she felt my love for her or her own love for me, but I chose the kinder interpretation. She gathered her hair into a little knot and propped her body up on an elbow. She looked me over carefully and I wondered what she saw. My life had not felt marked by particularity or specialness until then. "It's not going to be easy," she said.

"I know," I said, but I didn't know the why.

Ronna stopped coming in to work soon after that. She knew I loved her, she knew I was hers. I took up her shifts and she let me move in. She did not belong behind the bar, serving cheap poison by the pint. Some fine, pure thing flowed inside her veins, and I'd been around enough to know it was a rare substance, transformative maybe. I felt certain she was an artist, and that was something I was not, and whatever she was incubating had some divine, eternal quality. I didn't ask her about it and she didn't offer. My certainty was underscored each time I caught her eyes retreating into a mollified trance, traveling somewhere I couldn't go or see.

I still don't know where she goes when her eyes disappear under a fog. I can't tell whether her mind is actively working on problems then, trying to solve for the universe's most elusive X's, or if it's still and porous and fecund and that's when some remote data from the world enters her, attaching to her inner surfaces like brilliant moss. I haven't

asked. I'd rather not know.

It was a difficult time to live in New York City, the start of the millennium. In horrified awe, we watched one luminous century fold over and reveal its dark underpinnings. Once the center of the known living universe, the city rapidly developed the thick melancholy of had places: a permanent, fruitless nostalgia. It was not the place I envisioned when I arrived there, wide-eyed and pulsing, years before.

Watching Ronna dwell, poised, in the muck made it all bearable for me. Her patience was enchanting. When horrible things happened in the world, near and far, she behaved as a kind of living archive, watching their tangible effects amassing over the city like layers of ill-fitting clothes. After the twin towers fell, she carefully observed the changes in the fabric of daily life: customers turning vituperative with shop-owners, the epidemic of swollen eyes and hacking coughs, boutiques and cafes being shuttered, gaits hastening from strolls to scurries, the tunes of buskers shifting from heavy jazz to loose, frenetic beats. She noted when bar-goers began holding their beer glasses with two hands instead of one. She picked up on subtle font changes in weekly magazines. And every time someone who lived near us moved away, which happened often around that time, she made a big bowl of popcorn and gazed at the boxes being lifted into the truck. She beheld the event from the outside in, and for years she was like a glass too full with water, her surface aching to break.

On modified scales, it was the same with local violence, economic blight, natural disasters, blackouts, the onset of war overseas. She swallowed bad news bites eagerly, like stones, tracing their ripples and deciphering each one's full weight.

“You have a gift for tragedy,” I told her once, as we watched a summer night pass with the windows open.

“That’s like telling a girl she’s pretty when she cries.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Ronna, the cool wonder, smiled. “I know what you meant.” She ducked into the bathroom to brush her teeth and soap her face.

I came up behind her in the bathroom, my head floating beside hers in the reflection. “You’re an artist,” I said.

“Performance,” she said, thoughtfully.

“Why?”

“It’s alive,” she said, rubbing cream from a little pot into the skin around her eyes.

“Do it,” I said. “You have to do it.”

“I will,” she said, bristling a little. “I am.”

I smiled, proud to have been right.

When we got into bed, she said once again, “It’s going to be hard.”

“I’ll help you,” I said.

“That’s not what I mean. It will be harder on you than you think,” she said. “And you’ll bear it because you love me, but you’ll find someday that you gave more than you should have and got less than you deserved.”

“I’ll manage,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “Managing is what you do best.”

She became a tragedian, an improv artist. She needed no mentoring from theater

pros and she required no confidence-boosting from me. She knew what made people who they were by having watched them carefully all her life, by staying calm and empathetic while emotions rose and fell around her, and by never quite breaking herself.

We started at a small arts nonprofit, a black box that smelled like wet wood and old food. Ronna wanted to perform actual tragedies, events that feel universal to people because of all the exposure, and tragedies born from imagination too.

“Each catastrophe has a pulse all its own,” she writes in the artist’s statement on her website. “They affect us over and over again, despite our endless exposure to sad news. Fictional tragedies and actual tragedies are all pulled from the matter of human experience; they are all human. My work locates and channels the pulse of these stories into a frequency that can be felt, not specifically seen or heard. I work without costumes, sounds or words.”

We ask the audience to write known tragedies on index cards when they enter the building and we collect them in a giant bowl. She stands at center stage, naked, a thin white body; translucent, like fish who live in dark caves. The spotlight finds her, frosting her hair’s edges white. She bends down, chooses a card, pauses, announces the name, and invents something right there in front of us. She distills each tragedy’s essence through her body into a communicable charge in the air. The air grows thick, seems to ripple. Her focus, her stillness, holds us rapt.

I listen to audience members talking out on the sidewalk afterwards. A few inevitably complain. They sound as if they’ve just lost an hour stargazing and failing to locate constellations. “Is she making fun of us?” they ask. “Does she think we’re idiots?” They want to know how it’s done, and if they can’t tell, they conclude she’s a fake. She

could be a fake, I suppose it is possible. We share a life; I'm not the one to ask. I feel the sincerity of her work, and I trust that feeling like I trust the floor under my feet.

At home, we troll the newspapers, magazines, history books, literature and tabloids. We study the saddest stories around. Hiroshima. Anna Karenina. Bataan. Joan of Arc. Auschwitz. John Lennon. Juarez. Columbine. Dresden. A young mother in rural America who set fire to her children. They are all distinct, and at first, they all have what seem like infinite angles of approach. Any well-known story has been broken up into millions of pieces, large and small, and finding its emotional center is a painstaking process of refraction.

I begin to see their critical differences, but also their common ground. A vital aspect of so many tragedies arrives in the elongated pause before the demise, that time when promising futures are held captive in a contest of wills. The besieged do their staggering best to appear as if they are not living under the shadows of forces they can't beat.

People try to stump her all the time. Before she goes on, I vet the index cards, taking out anything she doesn't know. People write their dead pet's names or things that aren't actual tragedies but inconveniences or trials: "the slowness of the G train," "the ineptitude of Congress," "my waistline." To be a good filter, I mostly have to know *her*, know what she's capable of, and I study her so carefully that I am pretty confident in that.

I watch her from my seat in the front row. She's Ophelia tonight, and the key to that sadness lies just before she makes the decision to drown. The decision itself is a relief for the character.

If this were a film, the audience could see the muscle movements in her face and the despondence in her eyes, but she's on stage and so her helplessness must show in her structure. She wilts from the outside in, as cut flowers age, and I watch a dullness enter her fingers while the last vestiges of inner power shoot through her core, failing to fix her. Her shoulders curl ever so slightly inward, like the softened edges to an old piece of paper, and she sinks into herself.

I can feel her bearing down on the precise ingredients of that one, famous sadness. It's like watching her try to light a fire with her eyes, and it's excruciating, but it catches. The whole act lasts fifteen minutes.

When she leaves the stage, my body goes slack. I lift my hand to my forehead to find it lined with sweat. It's like this every time.

Afterward, we duck out the back entrance and walk the city blocks in silence. Her eyes catch mine from the side. They appear brittle, tired. After performing, she's a shell. I go home with the shell, I make food for it and help it get to sleep, and in the morning, usually, Ronna and I meet again.

Her star has risen quickly. She's been written up in the nicer magazines. Some fans become disciples; they're hooked, attending show after show. I've seen famous people – critics, directors, artists – in the audience. The same compulsion that brought me to her doorstep that first night together is active in her devotees.

We don't keep mirrors in the apartment anymore. They have an eerie quality for us. In public restrooms, I avert my eyes from the reflection. I see myself through her, through how she responds to me or doesn't, her pauses, her postures. She is less of a

human now than ever; the logistics of our life together fall to me. Our bills come in my name, I manage money and our correspondence. I keep the press happy at a calculated distance. I fill the fridge. She doesn't ask for things, yet I know what to bring her. Her shell-condition after each performance extends longer and longer, almost until the next show, so there is little variety to our experiences. We have her time on stage and her shell-time with me. She sleeps and eats and reads and sleeps. My days are filled with research, maintenance, housework. Our windows stay open, curtainless.

After a show, we walk home through the lit city. She turns to me.

"Do you know when I'm being false with you?" she asks.

"It doesn't matter," I say, and it doesn't.

"Dear," she says, her eyes hollow. "Have I become a monster?"

"Of course not," I say. She has, but she isn't evil.

What you can't know before following a glimmer home in the dark is how that light will change you. I can see the silver blush just inside the door to her alien world. I can feel her ignoring me on the sofa and not minding. I can witness her devotion to this thing, this thing she does, this watching, the places it takes her, and I can sense that none of my basic kindness to her will ever be returned. Until you feel the weight of your spent life accruing and holding you put, you don't understand.

Chasing rare light doesn't grant you access to its source. She is the force at large, trailing a magic that will always almost reach me, and I straighten the castle.

Elijah

For my father

Larry scraped his plate for the last morsels of skin and juice from the roast duck we had served.

“We’ve hardly talked about it with anyone,” he said. “It’s hard to care what people think and it’s hard not to care. Sometimes a discussion like this puts the decision up for grabs – as if what people think about it will determine its outcome.” Beth nodded in support, her hair collecting a faint shine from the candlelight.

“I don’t feel I’ve ever had any choice in the matter,” Joseph said, waving a hand. “Brian and I – well, we just *care*.” He looked at me, indicating I was to follow up with something wise.

I stalled. Faux wisdom benefits from a bit of silence in the foreground. The atmosphere in our home crackled with a sensitivity that belonged mostly to our guests. They had come to celebrate “something” which turned out to be a decision to enter the litigious, expensive waters of new-wave childbearing. “We’re obtaining a baby!” they all but said, and the last time the matter of potential children of theirs had come up in our company the night had fallen out from under everyone. A friend had squeaked the words “geriatric pregnancy” somewhere in the syntactic folds of an uncritical statement after Beth had mentioned her desire for children. In minutes, Beth’s face had become a terrarium of gloom.

“In a situation like this, approaching a family change,” I said, “you might as well examine the relationships you’ve built your lives on and your confidence in them – social

maladies are fairly contagious. They will affect your child in ways you couldn't possibly imagine going in." I leaned back. Vague enough to almost certainly be true; vague enough, certainly, not to offend.

A voice arrived through the speaker console and asked an arena full of people somewhere how they were "fee-lan on a Friday nigh-eeet!" A rollicking beat ensued, to which the recording artist gave advice for doing a lady upside, of all things, the butt.

Joseph screamed, rushing for the sound system. We'd come, sadly, to an age where we relied on our taste to do much of our socializing for us. The music was ours, and through some slip of mind or finger it had made its way onto the dinner playlist. Joseph fussed over the buttons until he located something that was more food-friendly, Watson Wilson or Bubs Bingham or whatever he likes people to know he likes now.

"So now you both know. We secretly love garbage." I smiled broadly. The four of us chuckled in that manner people do on airplanes when someone makes a witty gripe. We were friends, possibly; pals, certainly. We usually liked their company. I doubted Larry and Beth knew us as well as they presumed they did, though, and this thought carried the realization that we must make similar mistakes regarding the two of them.

"Never drink and download," Beth said, wrapping the episode and saving us a narrow slice of our grace. "These *kids* today." She made a tut-tut noise with her tongue.

Joseph cleared the last set of dishes away, put out a tray of crostini and re-seated himself. He made his "serenity now" face, closing his lids gently and letting out a breath, a move which serves his psyche as a blink serves the eyes – he does it to clarify, to end the previous sentence of activity so a new one can begin. I took his hand across the square table and pulled it closer to me. It was a clean, garlic-scented hand, with a brand-

new burn in the shape of a crescent on his thumb.

“You have such a lovely figure, dear,” Joseph said in a soft, semi-conscious way to Beth across the table. She blushed deeply. “Don’t worry for a minute. Girls like you snap back into shape like rubberbands.”

I used to think of Joseph’s invasive non-sequiturs as a form of rudeness, but they weren’t. He was addressing another frequency of tension, fault lines he saw in those around him that others could not see.

“It’s very traumatic,” she said, tentatively. “Carrying and delivery. I’ve known many women who – they change.”

“Yes,” I said.

“We understand,” Joseph said.

Larry brightened purposefully, as if emerging from a trance. He leaned forward.

“We’re thinking surrogacy or maybe adoption. We’re really just feeling it all out. Up for anything. On ovum, on zygote, on fetus, on newborn! We’ve put an ad out in the weekly – honey, pull it up for them. You should let us know how you think it sounds. Don’t be shy. Be mean! We don’t want to attract the wrong element.”

The wrong element. Francium?

Tin?

They were the kind of people you’d expect to have children, likely two, who’d complement their neutral environs perfectly, in bright jumpers, with popsicle-stained mouths. Deeper thinking revealed, though, that they were the type of couple you’d expect to see in photographs with their children, putting autumn leaves on each other’s heads or burying one another in Christmas wrappings – but not the type you’d ever actually see

with kids in tow. A capable nanny would raise them and Larry and Beth would swoop in for managerial duties that fell above the rule of nanny, and for photo sessions at holidays. They would fondly take up the more pleasant tasks: bedtime reading, et cetera, and they'd seem, to most, like good parents. They'd amass some evidence to support that image – tacking handprints and brownie recipes to the fridge in between news stories about the flu and chemical traces in the water supply.

Beth opened a wide, jangling purse and found her phone. She pushed at the buttons that conjured up the appropriate screen and cleared her throat to read.

“Let them read it to themselves,” Larry interjected. Beth looked disappointed but she released the phone. We put the glowing item in the middle of the table and huddled over it as if it were a rune bearing clues to our distant, collective future. It said:

Healthy, wealthy, happily married duo seeking a third or fourth member of our partnership to assist in child-bearing. We are open to adoption and surrogacy. As long as the genes are good and the situation is right, we're keeping an open mind. We desperately want to raise a child and give it the best life it could ever imagine. Let's start a conversation today. Please call!

Joseph sent me a wry look and dipped a crostini into a dish of white cheese. I took my time before speaking.

“You’re better than this,” I said, firmly. “You can do better than this. Unless you meant to sound like personal injury lawyers?”

“What's meant here by 'duo?'” Joseph asked. “I think it implies your partnership

has a musical quality.”

“Third *or* fourth?” I said. “Don’t they bill these ads by the individual word?”

“Come on, now,” Larry said.

“We asked them to be mean,” Beth said.

“You asked us to be mean,” I said.

“Read it aloud,” Joseph said. “Read it aloud and tell me it isn’t sinister.”

“Oh, boo-hoo, yes, it’s all very sinister,” Larry said, taking off his lovely, chocolate-framed glasses and rubbing at them with a cloth from his pocket. “We’re trying to loophole the natural and societal laws that for ninety-nine-point-three percent of human history have bound us. *Sinister*. For heaven’s sake. But find me a child on earth that isn’t sinister, and I’ll find you a supply of magic beans.” He leaned back and patted Beth’s shoulder, the edge of which cut a perfect right angle. Her posture was superior to everyone’s, and she was practically too thin to wear clothes. She took back jurisdiction over the phone and scrutinized the paragraph, her miniature, rosy nostrils flaring.

“I – *we*,” Joseph said, nodding at me, “meant that your tone feels somewhat disingenuous. To an outsider.”

“Just that part about ‘starting the conversation,’” I said, gently. “It has a business-jargon air to it.”

“You’ve got no business being defensive after asking our opinions, anyhow,” Joseph said, nodding. “We believe in speaking freely.”

“Well,” Beth said in a pale voice, “we’re a little defensive about the larger subject here. We expect people will be critical.”

Joseph’s worried look met mine.

“Oh, we're just picking apart your sales pitch! It's a giant step for you two,” I said, shaking my head. “We think you're terribly brave.”

“Terribly,” said Joseph.

Beth and Larry appeared to mend, giving each other little lovebird glances.

“And how modern!” Joseph said, lifting his glass in the candlelight so we could see the slight clouds of his fingerprints on it. “Cheers to this bright new futuristic baby of yours, whatever its sinister origins and peculiarities may turn out to be. I can't wait to see this all unfold.” His tone was so bright, so encouraging, not a trace of spite. Joseph was wonderful that way. In his best moments his voice was richly metallic, the syllables like precious ingots falling onto the table and into our hands. He could swivel anyone's mood to rights if he put his focus to it. The four of us raised our glasses and took big gulps of the wine, providing a welcome quiet.

“We have a name,” Beth said, new and smiling. “We think.”

Joseph gave me that look again, a fleeting look of terror.

“Oh?” he said.

Larry chimed in. “We're thinking 'Elijah,’” he said, as if to suggest it was the catch of the day.

“Hmm!” I said, positively. I could not do that glorious thing Joseph could do with my own voice.

“You don't like it? They don't like it,” Beth said.

“It's a powerful name,” Joseph said.

“A gorgeous name,” I agreed. “Though, do you think it's odd to name a hypothetical baby? A little quick? A little, say, childish?”

There was a gross silence. I'd hit a wrong note, a big one. Beth's eyes took on a lemony hue that made it known she was faltering.

“Have you run out of things to put in your mouth?” Joseph said, handing me a square of food.

“A name adds to the excitement. People name their companies before they go around leasing office space. What, precisely, are you criticizing? What kind of sin is it to fast forward a little?” Larry said.

“A child is not actually a business, despite the contractual nature of this affair. Anyhow, yes, that was the wrong thing to say. I heartily retract it. But well, let's think. It could, of course, be a girl,” I said.

“Or an Arab,” Joseph advised.

“That would hardly ruin our lives,” Larry said.

“We haven't gotten to the girls' names,” Beth said.

“So you are aiming for a boy, then,” Joseph said.

“Well – no,” Beth said carefully. “That name just came to us first.”

“Freud would disagree,” I put in.

“But a boy would be wonderful,” Larry said. “Boys are easier to raise.”

“Hardly!” Joseph cried, topping off everyone's glass. “Little men are just revolting. Stuffing their mouths with bugs and dirt and setting their arms on fire and huffing Renuzit and saying the vilest things. Boys are evil, make no mistake.”

“Girls stuff their mouths with dirt, too, as I recall,” I said, thinking back. “But perhaps they are more furtive about it.”

Joseph smiled. “So there. You have your possibilities. A furtive dirt-eater or a

proud, balls-out one.”

Beth slumped, her face swimming with nausea.

“Oh, no,” I said. “It’s only a phase, sweetheart.” Joseph and Larry both looked at me curiously. But wasn’t that a suitable thing to say? For that matter, did any of us know, really know, about childhood anymore? All any of us had had was the one try at it, and it happened, it seemed, centuries ago. When friends of ours had children, they were shuttled off onto another planet, or at least, far outside the city.

“Brian and I are just being awful,” Joseph said, his words taking on a slight whiskery edge. “Perhaps it’s time we closed our mouths. Anyone for coffee? Port?”

Beth shrugged.

“Well,” Larry said, his voice lost for ideas.

I could practically hear Joseph pleading for me to sink a quick, thick nail into the night’s coffin, but I wanted to address the matter simply, head-on. We did, in fact, have a sense of what they were going through.

“Trust me, dear, we know – we deeply, absolutely know – the difficulty of not being able to have children of your own. Sometimes a heaping spoonful of bad humor makes a thing feel less tragic,” I said.

“It’s not exactly that we can’t,” Larry said, his voice like a beam of unnatural heat, locating us. His eyes moved to his wife’s breasts, which were small and pert under her green cardigan. A trace of a blush traveled through the contours of her neck.

“We can,” Beth said. “We could. I could, I mean. There actually isn’t anything *wrong* with either of us! I don’t want all that havoc wreaked on my body. That’s all, honestly. I’ve only got the one.”

“Oh,” Joseph said. “How modern.” His voice had gone meek. I heard her words beat like little wings between his ears and felt a stir of a particularly old and sleeping guilt. The pace of his breath changed and he took the picked tray of food into the kitchen, and we heard a series of sounds: *clink, clank, clink*. I heard the words then, too, but this beating was big and proud; a timpani. I assigned my gaze to a series of cast iron sculptures we'd recently hung on the wall. They looked like charred ends of firewood. The flickering candles made the shadows behind them shrink and pool, lightening and thickening. How fast the littlest thing in one's home could throb with life if one fixated on it. I moved my attention to a ceramic turkey.

“Perhaps we should go,” Larry said, oozing fresh tact. “Seems like everyone's a little worn. Honey?”

“I think it's best,” she said, glancing around. “May we-”

“Not a chance,” sang Joseph from the kitchen over the sound of water running.

“Everything was tremendous, Brian,” Beth said. She put on her coat, nimbly working the buttons, and summoned a generous smile. “Even those awkward parts.”

She could morph into a real mother, possibly. At least she had the capacity for direct address. “We adore seeing you two,” I said.

Larry guided his wife away. I locked the door behind them. When the little beams of the headlights shrank from view, I drew the silken, egg-blue curtains. Joseph emerged from the deep corner of the kitchen and into my lap, as tiny, suddenly, as a pet.

“Well, fuck them,” he said.

“I wouldn't think of it,” I said, stroking the fur of his sad arm, which was wet from the dishes. He noticed then that his leather watch was dripping with soap, and he

unlatched it, letting it slide to the floor.

“I doubt she has any health concerns,” he said. “I know exactly what it is.”

“Oh?”

“I know exactly. She can't deal with *fat*, not even temporary, life-giving fat. That's it – that's the long and the short of it. She is a shallow person, that woman. She could be a god-damned teenager.”

“So could we. Whatever it is, it's certainly more complex than how you're putting it. Anyhow – not ours to judge.” I tapped his narrow nose and it twitched in annoyance. His body stiffened slightly and went slack. I was using my solvent voice, which had, at times, made Joseph feel weak. “You're so angry, dear.”

“Is denouncing a life decision worse than blindly supporting it?”

“They are equally cold moves,” I said after a pause. “We are not cold.”

“We feel cold tonight,” he said, as the chill he spoke of found me too.

“That's true. We do.”

We pulled ourselves into the bedroom and sloppily undressed, leaving our clothes in piles. We lay down without brushing our teeth, which were tinted blue from the wine.

At the end of the day, there it was, there it so happened to be. There were our two bodies, with unsubtly aging skin, laid out on white linens. There were our two old selves with all that chemistry and worth. Many male couples don't want children, of course, but we – well, we rather had, once. We'd talked, we'd ventured, we saw how it was done. In the nineties it had been a difficult option, but truly, it was an option. We had the money, most of the desire and most of the will. We knew people who found their children in country hospitals abroad or safe havens in the city, or who arranged equations of sperm

and egg that worked out better than all our wary predictions.

When the hypotheticals had gathered in our heads and arranged themselves into an unbearable crescendo, Joseph and I went away to his aunt's shore house to think. We would come to our own decisions, share them when they arrived. If either of us chose no, we said, that would be the choice.

Family. I meditated on the word. Family. Fatherhood. What could it mean, this mysterious, permanent act? The world contained wonderful fathers, I was certain, but I did not know what they were like. Mine had been a snake. We spent a week on that cold, gray beach, poking at sea glass and crab husks in relative solitude, coming together for some of our meals but steering clear of each other in the evening hours. Family. We slept in separate rooms, intent on giving each other the space to think the possibilities out. Fatherhood. A life sentence. A brain-splitter.

Our last morning there, I woke up in a sweat. I saw my face in the bathroom mirror, white and waxy, as if the nutrients had been bled away. I called for Joseph and he came.

I can't do it, I said. It's no good.

He sat down. Okay, he said, okay. I'd been thinking otherwise, he said, voice catching in throat. The force of his disappointment reflected something I hadn't seen and couldn't see. With the freedom of imagination solitude allows, the picture had advanced into a forest of detail. He'd envisioned small wonders; hands, feet, tufts of hair. He saw himself standing over a little person beside me, proud and ready.

He asked, simply, what it could be.

I showed him my central worry. It was small and unassailable, a lump of granite

in a box meant for gold. Not the kind of thing we can reverse, I said, a child. I was the man I was, I said, explaining: a man who found his own happiness to be a fragile, craftless invention held by tape and string. It would *not* bear the scrutiny of tiny, curious eyes, and I knew that then, in life's prime. All that was between us was an event too lucky, an evasion of damning sadness, and I did not dare ask for anything more.

I promise you I would have done it, he told me, driving back into the city. He was in. He would have done what it took, made the adjustments. He'd have endured whatever change, cost or corruption was necessary to give us the family life, to redefine for each of us what that phrase was capable of meaning.

Our life had continued. Not perfectly happy, of course, no, not that, but really, overall, it had been very good.

In our dimly lit room - surrounded by our beautiful things, our past - I watched Joseph's tired breath rise and fall. His arms loosely clutched my own.

"Hey," I said. "Look at me."

He didn't look, though. He was done with me tonight. His eyes moved beneath the lids, side to side, scanning the stores of his mind for evidence of a kinder, more promising history. We would continue yet. A shadow had passed between us, that was all.

Passenger

He was taking her just across the border to Mali, a hundred and twenty miles out and then back to the hotel in Ghana where she was staying. She had decided to go in a rare gust of afternoon energy she knew would fade if she did not use. She'd chosen the mode of travel based on her guidebook's recommendation. Bike guides are safe and inexpensive, the book said, and it outlined a few peculiar behaviors to watch out for and what to do in the event of trouble.

They met early in the morning at a kiosk just off the main road. The hotel manager had suggested the place, said there would be good guides there looking for business. She chose him out of a group of five. He appeared the cleanest and the handsomest; traits she associated with trustworthiness. When she first saw him, she had an urge to touch him. She had been in Africa for four days and had felt this urge before with other people, men and women both, but never as strong as with him, her moped guide. She wanted to course her hands over his skin. She did not think of this urge as sexual. It felt simpler and more childish to her than that, a pure curiosity.

"You can call me Michael," he said after they had discussed money.

"Is that your name?" she asked. She could not help but feel on her guard here, frequently asking people "what?" when she'd heard them exactly, and answering people's questions in short, cloaked phrases. She counted the bills twice and put them into his hand.

"It's better than my name," he said.

"What good is a fake name?" she said.

“Well what is your name?”

“Irene,” she said, wondering where the idea for the name had come from. She had never known an Irene. Her true name felt cold and flat beneath her tongue.

“That’s better than my name too,” he said.

“If you tell me your name, I can tell you why it’s better than Michael,” she said.

“Or Irene.”

“Stop flirting with me, Irene. If we are going to have a successful adventure, you are going to have to stop taking my mind off the adventure.”

She started to respond and then closed her mouth. Men who assume flirtation take protest as deeper flirtation, she thought. Also, she thought, calling something flirtation suddenly makes it seem as though flirtation is what it is. She wondered if she had been flirting or had not been flirting, and suddenly there was little difference between the two things.

Brown was the word that came to mind when she pressed cash into his palm for hire, the light paper light in his dark hand and his dark hand dark against the tan ground. It was also the word that came to mind when she tightened her knees around his waist to travel the countryside. Clinging to him on the vehicle, she thought of their bodies as halves of a single, sides to the moon. One visible, the other not. If they entered a town in this country, he was invisible, she was not. Had she been guiding him through her hometown, it would have been the opposite. Type and reverse type. You appear there, I appear here, she thought.

“Where did you grow up?” she asked.

“It was a village far away from here, in Nigeria. It’s a very different country. Have

you heard of Lagos?” She nodded. “It was the nearest city. It sounds pretty, but you don’t want to go there. Not a good place for a girl like you.”

“Tell me a story from when you grew up,” she said, watching his brown shirt balloon with air and flap as he accelerated the bike. The bike’s wheels made a ticking sound as it gained speed, like a mechanical arm winding up. She’d ridden a moped like this before, in the States, got it up to twenty and panicked, the needle quivering on the dial and her mind racing with knowledge of the severity of an impact with anything at that speed. She had no sense of their true speed here, but she felt no panic. She was not in charge of the bike. If anything happened to them, it would be on him, she thought. Brown, she thought, followed by an uncertainty as to why she might have thought it.

“You first,” he said. His words cut through the wind cleanly, as sharp and decisive as if they had been printed on a banner.

She thought of her childhood and things that might be interesting to him. All that came to mind were milestones: learning how to ride a bike, learning how to drive a car, learning how to swim, that time she broke her toe, and the first time she smoked a cigarette behind the shed at her mother’s house.

“I have an older brother,” she said, and the wind overcame her words. In order to be heard, she would have to scream. “I used to look up to my brother!” she said again, as loud as she could. “I sneaked out one day to follow him and his friends to the creek!”

“You were in love with your brother?” he called out.

“No! It was innocent!” she cried.

“You were innocent!” he screamed back. She did not immediately realize he’d meant it as a question.

"It was innocent!" she cried. She told him in short bursts how she had walked across the rickety metal bridge over the creek barefoot and broken her big toe when she stumbled and caught it between two crooked slats. She told him how her brother had bandaged her foot with his handkerchief and carried her home in his arms like a bundle of firewood. After the story, she felt exhausted.

Michael started to laugh, heartily, not unkindly.

"You were so fast to get out there you forgot to put on your shoes! You tried to be a boy, but you are a girl!"

She was instantly offended. "What's the difference?" The moment she yelled it, she remembered that issue of flirtation, and she felt her quadricep muscles tense around his body. She knew he could feel this physical information and if he had been looking for reasons to flirt with her, now he had some encouragement. She added gender to a growing list of things that would not be good topics for the ride.

"Irene, what are you doing back there?" he asked, slowing, the engine going quieter. She didn't answer, and he didn't press.

The scenery was exactly what she had envisioned when she signed up for the trip through the student travel office at her school. Somehow in person it was more vivid and less beautiful. There were the iconic images of laundry on lines, muddy thatch-roof dwellings, women carrying heavy items on their heads and wearing bright, wooden jewelry. The areas that looked to her like campgrounds and dioramas, people called permanent homes and villages. She could not imagine having so few things, so few layers, and all of them permeable.

Coca-Cola was served everywhere in glass bottles at great expense compared to

everything else. She enjoyed the coffee with its berrylike flavors and tealike scents, but none of the local food appeared, well, *happy*. She'd seen monkeys and lizards and large, opalescent beetles – none of the great cinematic beasts in this part of the continent. The villages had sour, earthy smells that were unusual to her nose, and everything was more difficult than she'd anticipated, even though she'd known well enough to anticipate exactly that. All her biological necessities took forethought and preparation – she'd had a dozen inoculations just to set foot on the land, and she was developing firm, new muscles in her legs from squatting tensely over pots.

Before the trip, she thought maneuvering these challenges would afford her an intangible quality shared by the intrepid travelers of the world, a hard grace. But it only kept her out of step. There had been no sustained joy to give those preparations, that work, any kind of meaning. Occasionally she'd catch a glimpse of something spectacular – a wild flower, a striking hill, a couple of happy kids scuffling in the river – and her clouded mood would briefly part so glee could break through and then it would leave just as suddenly with the faintest air of a cackling witch. The brightness of the countryside and the surefootedness of these people in it made her feel that her paleness was entwined with a kind of vulnerability – that she was too soft and impressionable for this place.

She'd run out of sunscreen on the second day in the country and had to buy more at the local prices – it was the only thing priced high, she noticed – and even that was running low. She could feel the tops of her ears baking, her mouth drying out.

“We need to stop soon, Michael,” she called out. They'd passed through the rocky section of the journey and here the moped buzzed smoothly over ground. “I'm starting to burn.” She managed one hand into her bag to pull out the tube she had, gripping him with

the other. He slowed down in response and she was able to keep balance by tightening her knees and focusing on her movements. With one hand, she smeared the last of the lotion onto her ears, neck, and face, and put the empty tube in her bag.

She looked at the back of his neck, his arms. His skin appeared perfect to her. Poreless. The design of it offered its own protection; it looked as though it could absorb anything, withstand anything. He was a strong person; his body was tight and tall, and he leaned easily into each turn in a way that she instinctively followed. It made her think of dancing, and then she thought of the way most men she knew danced: timidly, as if their steps might cause the ground beneath them to cave.

“This sun is hard for Americans,” he said, accelerating loudly to pull them up an inclined stretch of road. “There’s a town close to here, we can stop for your lotion. You never told me, where are you from?”

She pulled a strand of hair away from her mouth. “North Carolina,” she said. “Have you heard of it?”

He concentrated; she felt his posture change. “It is in ... the southeast.”

“That’s right,” she said, not concealing her astonishment.

She tried to picture Michael’s America, how it looked to him. Was it a big shape with a handful of cities and landmarks writ bold, like her Africa was? Was it glitzy and hypersexual, or industrious and sensible, as she often thought of it? She ticked off a list of the things she knew he would know. Hollywood, the recent presidents, sports – Coca-Cola, of course, and the other brands. The Statue of Liberty.

“What do you think of when you think of America?”

“I have never been to America. I think about ... wide streets,” he said

enthusiastically. “Cars. Basketball. Big brick houses. Movies. But that is just pictures I have in my head. Just like Africa is not *The Lion King*.”

She laughed, nodding.

“It isn’t *one thing*, but there is something common to Americans. I can’t think of the word now ...”

“Spoiled?”

“Expensive. *No*. Eccentric. You want things but you don’t want them. Everything is a negotiation about the image it sends out into the world. Your dark deeds go undercover. I think you know it makes a for a rich country, but not a happy person.”

She was struck by his answer, and then by her own comparatively superficial knowledge of his culture, his people. Most of the cultural information she read in guidebooks failed to attach. She had not spoken with any individuals about what their lives were like, what they thought about. She had not met anyone, not really, beyond a few chance exchanges that helped her get from transaction to the next. She had been there four hard-earned days and her time had felt like a series of constant social reactions, each one’s fizzle setting a new one off, like a row of tiny firecrackers placed too close to each other.

“I had an American girlfriend once,” he said.

“Oh?”

He pulled up to a newsstand and parked the bike, steadying it so she could dismount.

“She came with the Peace Corps. From Wisconsin,” he said, saying it almost as a person from Wisconsin might – Wis *kahn* sin. The flattened vowel sound made her smile.

It seemed to protrude from everything else he said, like a knob or ledge.

“Go get your sunblock,” he said. “I’ll see what there is to eat.”

She went inside the store and was faced with two narrow aisles crammed to the gills, stacked high above her head with cheap-looking items in no identifiable order. She scanned the inventory, stupefied, and shook out her legs. Her skin was streaked with pink in places where she couldn’t reach to rub in the lotion. A box of pink bottles marked SPF 30 lay on the floor. She picked up two bottles and put them on the counter along with a pack of bubble gum. She never chewed bubble gum, but there was something comforting about that kind of frivolous purchase here.

Michael was waving from across the dirt road when she walked out, seated at a table with bright red tablecloth and white chairs. He had bought two bottles of beer, and they were dewy and sweating in the center of the table.

“I think you’ll like this food,” he said.

“Why?”

“What makes you so suspicious of me?” he asked, smiling. She noticed for the first time that the whites of his eyes were rimmed with red, as if sore from illness or tears.

“What is wrong with saying ‘I think you’ll like this food?’”

“I don’t know,” she said, willing herself to relax. “You don’t know my taste.”

“So, tell me about your taste.”

She quietly drank her beer, which was flat and tasted somewhat like honey. It was the most sustained time she’d spent with another person in Africa, and it was beginning to feel intimate. Reliant. Something was being quibbled over and she did not know what.

“Irene, you worry too much.”

She bristled. “Worrying is useful. You don’t know what it’s like to be a woman traveling alone.”

“Alone?” he asked. “What have you done alone?” He leaned back and a woman in a bright cotton dress brought them a plate full of little fried fish smeared with pepper sauce.

“Everything!” she said emphatically, causing beer to spray from her lips. She blushed and wiped the drops from the table with a cloth napkin. “Sorry.”

“What is everything?”

“I planned my trip alone. I got my shots alone. I flew here alone. I transferred planes alone back in London. I rode in my taxi to the hotel alone. I purchase my food alone, I eat alone and read alone, I walk through the village alone, I hired you alone.”

“You paid for your trip alone, too?” he asked, looking at her pointedly. He laughed. “You know, everything you say includes other people. You are crazy, girl. And even if you feel like you are alone, if you think for one minute that if something happened to you in my country it wouldn’t make the news wires, you are extra crazy. An American girl is *never* alone.” His eyes flashed. “You have registered with the embassy. You have registered with your travel agency. If you miss your plane, you will be news in your country. That is something. That is not alone.”

Another plate arrived, this one piled with dark rice and vegetables. The food tasted good to her, and she ate as much as she could.

He continued. “Your money. Wherever its value comes from, do you think that was you? Do you know how many languages I can speak?” He shook his head, watching her. “That is my money, that is my worth. I can talk to anyone I need to. I can talk to you

and take you where you need to go. My money is up *here*.” He tapped his head.

“Well, congratulations,” she said. She recognized something in her voice’s tone with pleasure – it was the warm, teasing voice she used with boys at parties or with her close girlfriends. His own voice was heating up and straining.

“But do you know why? Because here we are at the service of the first world. What we have is yours. What we can do is yours. We work for you, and you will not learn our languages so we learn yours. The only language you need to speak is American dollars. That will translate anywhere.” He exhaled. “Alone.”

“I see,” she said, calmly. A breeze whipped up and passed through, rattling the near-empty beer bottles on the table. It was true, she supposed, or mostly true. The feat of actually being alone when you were born into privilege was quite difficult to manage. You had all sorts of socially guaranteed concerns for your welfare forming scaffolding underneath your decisions, however lousy those decisions turned out to be.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you,” he said, reaching across the food to touch her shoulder. “I don’t think of you that way, I think you are a nice girl having a nice little time in my part of the world and trying to see things she cannot see at home and I want to help you do that here in safety. But I don’t think you are alone.”

“It’s a fair point,” she said. “What do I owe you for lunch?”

He paused, like an iron hesitating over a wrinkle. “Nothing for lunch.”

“Nothing?”

“Please,” he said.

They ate quietly, letting the moment pass over them, then walked in the white heat back to the bike. Michael bent down to unlock the chain.

“Tell me about your American girlfriend,” she said.

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you want to tell,” she said. She began smearing sunscreen on her arms and legs in big strokes. The cool wetness of the lotion mixed with the breeze felt good to her.

“She was a virgin,” he said, his voice dropping an octave. He looked her squarely in the eyes. “I can tell, don’t ask me how I can tell, but I can tell you are a virgin too.”

She stopped with the lotion, her face tingling as if it had been lightly slapped. He wiped a streak of lotion from her collarbone with his thumb. Whatever she said next would sound like flirting, this time she had no doubt. She pressed her teeth together.

“Irene, I am just teasing you!” he said, punching her shoulder lightly. Her trance broke and she smiled, oddness returning multifold. A wave of color washed through her face and she kept smiling, unable to think of what to say.

“She was good girl, but not a good girl for me. She was fine for a while,” he said. “She wanted to take me to the United States.”

“She must have liked you a lot, then.”

“Not like you think, Irene. If I went to your country – there, I would be alone. Except for one person who brought me over to that country to show me off.”

She thought of the students at school who had come from the other side of the world to study. They carried themselves differently than the Americans – more adult, somehow. In her mind, they possessed secrets. They’d filled out paperwork, gained visas and funding, proved their certainty of where they wanted to be and what they wanted to do in a way she never quite could. And they were fine, it seemed, being one of a kind in a

classroom – fine being alone.

“It sounds romantic in a way. You might have liked America.”

“No, it’s not like you think. Come on, let’s go.”

He steadied the bike and she got on, reasserting her grip first on her bag, and then his body. When his thin brown shirt puffed with the bike’s acceleration, she saw that his clothes were thoroughly dry, while her own clothes were filmy with sweat. Nothing to do about how her body processed this place, she thought. It was just off.

She didn’t know how long she had been sleeping, but when she woke, it felt like a great deal of time had passed. There was a patch of saliva near her mouth in a large dark shape on his shirt. Her eyes longed for sleep, her body still confused about the truth of night and day here. The sky’s light had changed. Pink had entered the field of blue. It was late, possibly. She tried to open her mouth and ask Michael a question, but her throat was too dry. She shifted position and he turned his head back halfway, noticing her movements. The muscles in her inner thighs cramped and she could not convince them to relax. She tried to do the math of what time it would be and how far they’d traveled, but before she could settle on a number, her eyelids sank down and her head lay back against the cloth of his shirt.

When she woke again the sky was soaked with gold. Michael had stopped the bike; the absence of motion had jarred her sleeping body.

“Hey, girl,” he said, turning around carefully. “We’re taking a little break now.”

She felt more sunburned and dried out than ever, and salty from layers of sweat.

“You were cooking back there a long time,” he said, matter-of-factly.

“Where are we?” she rubbed her eyes and reached into her bag for her water bottle, now warm and soft to the touch. She dismounted. The ground was spotted with clusters of green succulents. The air was hot enough that it shimmered even as the day’s light was fading.

“This is the last little stop for us. I think you will be happy to see this place.”

“It’s not a place,” she said. “We are nowhere.”

“We’re in the country.”

“I don’t think we have time to stop. It’ll be dark soon,” she said, her tongue slow.

“Can you show me on the map where we are?”

“It doesn’t matter where we are.”

“It matters to me,” she said. “I’m not comfortable with this, Michael. Are we lost?”

He scoffed. “I don’t get lost.”

He was quiet. “You don’t want to go to Mali. It’s not safe there,” he said. “They have unrest. Protests, sometimes there is violence. We should stay on this side of all those unhappy things.”

“But that’s why we’re here,” she said firmly, her mind starting to clear. “We’re here to go to Mali. I can handle myself. That’s why *I hired you*.”

“I know it’s why *you hired me*,” he said, mocking her tone. “But I think I would know what’s best for this situation.”

“It doesn’t matter what’s best. You can’t change the trip on me just because I fell asleep.”

He laughed. “It wouldn’t matter if you had fallen asleep or not!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You wouldn’t know the difference where we were. I could put a sign up that said ‘Welcome to Mali,’ with a little smiling monkey and a flag and you would think you were there. What is the difference to you, crossing one border? What do you care about having your feet in that country or this one? I think you only want to say those words when you get back home, *I went to Mali on a moped.*” His eyes flashed. “With *Michael.*”

“That’s why *I hired you,*” she said again, her pulse rising. She surveyed the horizon, a flat dry landscape with a few interrupting trees. She could see no buildings, and no vehicles had passed them. If not for the plantlife, as desolate as the moon. “Because you know where to go and I don’t. You’re my *guide*, Michael. That’s our relationship, that’s why we’re here.”

“I understand it now. Thank you for clearing it up for me. *That’s* why we’re here.” He kicked his toe into the ground, sending up a cloud of dust that made her cough but that his lungs did not seem to notice. “You don’t like it here, but it’s beautiful,” he said.

She was tired. She imagined there was some comfort to be felt through his body, his confidence, even his anger – if she got close enough to him, to his body, could those traits seep into her somehow and become accessible?

“I don’t trust you,” she said.

“Are you sure you want to tell me that?” he was teasing again. He placed his hands on her shoulders, looking her over.

“I want to like you.”

“But you don’t.” He let his arms fall to his side. “We have traveled together all day long. I can see that you don’t.”

“It wasn’t a date,” she said. “You are helping me. You work for me.”

“And you need me now.” He smiled. Quickness returned to his face.

“Yes,” she said, awkwardly. “I need you now.”

“What would you do if I left, Irene?”

“What?” She laughed and shook her head. “Don’t do that now, please don’t make fun of me anymore. I’m tired.”

“If I *left*,” he said, and she winced as the hard word hit her. “If I got on my bike and left you right now, with your bag and your water and your lotion and your M&Ms or whatever it is you have in there. If I did that, what would you do?”

“Are you threatening me?” she asked. “Is this some kind of a threat?” She thought back to her guidebook, what to do in case of a confrontation. Little bits she recalled about cultures, manners ... but this was a human, not a country. She would have to solve *him*, work with him, to get home. Her guidelines were too general to matter. She was not in actual danger, she reasoned. Michael liked her, deep down. He was pulling rank, proving his necessity. Well, that was fine. He could have it. He was a necessity.

He laid the bike onto the ground and put his hands behind his head, tilting his chin up. *If I kiss him*, she wondered, *what then?*

“Look around you, girl,” he said, his tone shifting into something more pleasant.

“Look up at that sky.”

She beheld the sky: rippling with color, viciously bright.

“Please take me home,” she begged. “I don’t like this. I can’t enjoy it with you.”

He cocked his head to one side and took a step forward, inspecting her.

“Do you think you are sick?” His voice had gone low again.

“I don’t know,” she said. The landscape around her seemed to sway.

“Do you want to go to Mali?” he asked. “With Michael?”

“No,” she said, the word cracking. “I want to go home.”

“You want to go home, girl, I know. But home is too far, far across the sea. It would be better for you to be home, with your friends, your music, the food you like to eat and that your body is accustomed to. But home is too far for me to take you. You need to be here right now. You need to be here in this place, this country you wanted so badly to come to all *alone*.”

He approached her and touched her shoulder. She flinched. The skin was burned. He touched her hair, coarse from the dried sweat, her scalp tight and dry. A grand, sore lump rose up in her throat. She felt like a child, and she felt he must be looking at her, now, as a child. He looked at her with pity.

“I’m not going to take you anywhere,” he said. “No, I don’t think so.” He pulled the bike upright and got onto the seat, starting up the engine. He rode away from her, the bike’s engine ticking loudly behind. She watched it go and as she watched she heard cries come from her body that did not sound like her own.

The body on the bike shrank down against the golden sky until it blended in with the rest of the landscape. She pulled the map out from her purse. Compared to the land, it was a general, flat thing, unsubstantial as a toy. She squinted at the dark type. She could make out the thick lines denoting regional borders and cities represented by stars, with few urban centers and main roads named. She put the map away and looked down at the unpaved road, its pale dirt, and then up at the tilted half moon.

Raven

“This is tragic,” Dorie announced over the phone. “I am a tragedy.”

“Try saying it with a British accent,” Kim said. “Draw it out. Trahhgic.”

“This is serious.” Dorie said it casually, with an air of distraction. Kim turned off the running sink and listened closer.

“You are not a tragedy,” Kim said.

“Can you do something?” Dorie asked. “Can you come here?”

“No, I can’t come there. You need to see this isn’t fate, Dorie. It’s not an accident, either. It’s a thing you’ve *done*, a conscious act, and you have to work out what happens next.”

“It’s a little like fate,” Dorie mused. “It’s a kind of accident.”

Kim sighed. She could hear something unusual in Dorie’s voice across the line, a trembling overlain with cheer.

“How is Nour doing?” Kim asked. “What are your conversations like?” She stared, flat-eyed, at the pot of white noodles boiling on the stove.

“Nour is a darling, a champion – he’s around the moon,” Dorie said.

“Over the moon?”

“Over and under both, you know. On the far side, the dark side ... Kimsy, listen to me. I don’t know what to do.”

“You have to decide. I can’t help you solve this one. I can listen to you until you stop feeling tragic,” Kim said. “If you want.”

“I decide,” Dorie said, rinsing the words with a new, indecipherable meaning.

Kim made an effort to sound even. “Dorie. I’m going to go now. I have to think about how to talk to you about this.” She guessed from the silence that Dorie liked that idea, unless, well, there was always the chance an unrelated thing had caught her attention.

“That’s fine. I have to go with Nour to eat some halal meat.”

Kim rubbed her jawbone and said nothing.

“Do you know what halal meat is? It’s when they bless the chicken before they cut its – ”

“I know what it is. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

Kim pressed the “end” button in her phone and smacked it down on the counter. She drained the pasta and picked a noodle apart with her fingers, the food too soft to eat.

She chose a pencil from the pencil cup and pulled an envelope out from a mail stack. She sketched a face, a pretty woman’s face, with hearty cheeks, a flat nose and sad, droopy eyes. She created shadows below the eyes and carved out wrinkles near a mouth that neither smiled nor frowned. She added a shock of wild hair, pressing hard with the pencil, and a cheap pair of earrings. This could be what Dorie looked like now: an overripe beauty. *I am a tragedy*, Kim wrote out in the white space above the floating face. *I am a comedy*, she wrote beneath the face.

Dorie was pregnant again – *again*, again, the third time in recent memory – and again, she did not know what to do.

Kim sat in the chair examining the drawn image until Gabriel came through the door.

“Dinner is fucked,” Kim said.

“What’s going on?” He bent to kiss her.

“Dorie called. I’m sorry. I messed it all up.”

“Dorie!” he said. “What happened?” He picked up the sketch and smiled. “*I am a tragedy*,” he said.

Kim took the envelope back. “She’s pregnant.”

“I thought all that was over.”

“So did I, but here it is.”

“Yeah. Okay. Is she happy about it?”

“Are you kidding? She,” Kim said, “is thrashing around like a college freshman, pretending not to understand any of it.” As she said it, she knew it could not be all the way true, but it seemed partly to be true.

“She wants me to come to Colorado.”

“For what?”

“Advisement? A hug? I don’t know.”

“She’s going to do what she wants.” Gabriel’s tone was controlled, equal parts irritated and amused. He placed a hand on his wife’s neck beneath her hair and moved it back and forth, releasing the tension she held there.

“I want her to do what she wants.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” Gabriel said. “She can’t tell.” He set the picture down and picked up the phone. “Pizza?”

Kim had recently quit smoking so they could try for a child themselves. She

wasn't a heavy smoker, but she had smoked for years, and the cessation of chemicals caused her dreams to change. They were stronger now, louder, the images thicker and more physical. When she woke up she was exhausted.

That night, she dreamt her husband was receiving a haircut from Dorie on a warm, tea-colored afternoon. Dorie held his head steady between her thighs while she fussed with his sunny red curls. She removed his glasses. Gabriel asked her if she would shave his face, too. Dorie silently obliged, reaching for the cream and the blade that were already at her side. They faced one another and their bodies tensed, all but Dorie's hands, which moved easily, knowing their terrain.

The scene changed. Kim was cooking breakfast. She cracked an egg with a knife and poured it into a hot pan. It was pure albumen. She scraped it off the skillet into the garbage and broke another egg. It was all yolk. She wasted the dozen looking for a proper egg. When she cracked the last one, the shell gave way to a smaller shell, like a nesting doll. Inside that shell was a weightless ball of feathers, a chick no bigger than a spider, which pecked at Kim's thumb and hopped across the counter.

Before the alarm sounded, Kim woke, sweat lining the collar of her tee shirt. She turned to face Gabriel and touched his cheek. At this hour he had a smell she equated with warmth. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," he said.

"I'm gonna go see her," she said.

"See who?" His eyes opened. "Dorie? Is she going to pay for it?"

"I can't ask her to do that." She was still. "I *want* to see her. I miss her."

"What do you miss about her?"

“Ask me something you don't know the answer to.”

“You might care what she does more than she does.”

“She takes it seriously. All of it. Most of it. It's not something I can explain to you.”

“Can you try?”

Kim shook her body free of his and pulled her knees to her chest. She extended her legs one at a time, stretching out her hamstrings and flexing her calves.

“Nope.”

Dorie sat, restless, at the café counter. The barista liked her, and that was enough to keep the evening interesting. He didn't pay attention to Nour; few men did. Handsome guy, medium build, listened to people with genuine patience – he was easy for men to dismiss. Mostly, when they were together, Nour let her do the talking – and talk she did, telling everyone their story. She wore their predicament proudly, like a hat. She liked that his presence served as a translucent layer over hers. It was not a source of light on its own, or not the kind of light for which most people looked.

“So what are you going to do?” the barista said, pushing a cinnamon pastry her way. He was emptying the display case into paper sacks, getting ready to close.

“We'd love to raise a child together,” she said, tearing at the sweet. She caught Nour's eye and his face erupted into a deep, tawny blush. “And really my body just so terribly wants to *be* pregnant that I know it's bound to thump in that direction no matter what we do this time. It's like an ancestral calling, you know, something the body understands before the brain.”

The barista laughed darkly. “That doesn’t sound right from what you’ve told me.”

“That’s just how I see it, man,” Dorie said, blinking.

“Uh huh. Let me get this straight. You think it’s your ancestry that got you into this bind, and not that you *love* tempting fate?”

Dorie could tell by the way he looked at her, how his eyes hooked onto the loose tie of her blouse, his emphasis on the word *love* and how the inflection subtracted any notion of pure love from that word, that he was picturing her body stripped down, moving and twisting with the tides of his own impulses. She placed her right hand below Nour’s belt, feeling him gently rise, pressing down to increase the sensation. Nour’s eyes didn’t flutter. For all the awkwardness he showed when it came to matters of the heart, matters of the body were different. He managed the change in a relaxed mode; he wasn’t shifty or anxious. The barista couldn’t see her hand beneath the counter, but he could feel that an exclusion was occurring. With her left hand, Dorie dipped a chunk of pastry into her coffee.

She knew what the guy behind the counter was like, she’d been with versions of him before. Men who desired her incessantly and were ashamed of it, too, so they’d punish her with passive aggression, suggestions that she – *her* naughtiness, *her* impulsivity – was to blame for whatever discomfort befell them both.

“I do like tempting fate,” she said. She sipped from her mug. “But I’ve been licked by it too, you know? I can tell when something wants to eat me alive.”

The first time she was pregnant, age twenty-six, Dorie called Kim and called her

mother and then went straight to the clinic. She was in the middle of graduate school, she had met the guy at a bar, and all she remembered was the way he felt wrong in her body and the peculiar way light left his eyes when he fucked her. They gave her a sedative at the clinic. She wore headphones to cover the sound of the instrument working and focused on the ceiling. The experience left her feeling powerless and dispirited, upon hearing which Kim gently pointed out “there are reasons it’s unpopular.”

The second time was something else entirely. The love affair was promising. Nour was young but he was also humble, a good counterweight for her. He cared about their future. She met him two months after the abortion, when she was still reeling with emotion and craving “life.” He was just that to her, life. When they made love, it was otherworldly love, volcanic, insane. They were tapping into the primordial ooze of the earth, and when you’re tapping into the ooze, who thinks about precautions?

She considered having the baby, but she could not picture it alive, always sleeping or crying nearby, always needing something vital of hers.

So she bent the ears of every female she knew for creative advice. She eventually found Bête, the deeply ridged, ninety-year-old West Indian artist who lived in a cabin in the foothills and had been, as she put it, “a sexual maximalist.” If it was a lifestyle, Bête had adopted it. If it was physically possible, Bête had done it, perhaps with a celebrity.

“It is a reversal, but you must not go backward,” Bête had said, serving Dorie a cold glass of sorrel wine. “The only way to do, is to give this time in your life a spiritual significance.”

“Yes!” Dorie had whispered, thirsty for wisdom and utterly still. “I want spiritual. A spiritual reversal.”

Two days later, Dorie left Nour a note in his mailbox. “I’ve gone,” it said, “to earn my witch’s colors. Ta-ta.” Armed with some newly assembled knowledge of natural medicine and Bête’s advice, she bound herself in the old woman’s guest quarters. Day one, she had been instructed, was for fasting and prayer.

For Dorie, praying was a new thing. She undressed to do it. She unfolded a blanket on the floor beside the bed and opened the window to let the autumn breeze come through. She lay down belly-up and spoke formless paragraphs into the air.

“Hello?” She cleared her throat. Her voice was quiet and high, straining for confidence. “Hello! You’re onto me, whoever you are, you must know me very well by now. You’ve seen me from all sides. I want this to be a baby. I wanted this to be a baby. Every time I look at Nour, who is so lively and precious and good, I see a baby. But we’re not strong enough yet and we don’t have enough money. We don’t have enough time behind us to know what to do.

“This is what we’re going to do, you and me. I’m turning my body over *to you*. I’m eating what Bête gives me. I’m staying right in here. I’m thinking about what this means. I’m staying put. I’m marinating on the subject.”

She heard that her voice was rattling, and fell quiet. She studied the room, the angle of the shadows, the contours of her palms. She picked at her toenails and at the splintering edges of floor planks. Breezes stirred the air and she could hear Bête running water, cleaning pans, opening and shutting doors in the main part of the house. The taste of hot salt filled her mouth; she expected nausea to follow.

A different feeling arrived, then, forceful and unfamiliar. Her own voice sounded silly to her – its youthful sound, the sheer naivete. She was on her back in a cabin on a

mountain, talking to a god she considered imaginary about a natural consequence she knew was not. She couldn't deny that she didn't believe a solution would magically arise, not even in this place so attuned to magic, with beautiful, mysterious Bête at the helm.

Dorie turned over on her side, tears crawling across the fattest part of her cheeks, over her nose, getting the quilt damp.

She gave herself over to sorrow, letting the cries be ugly and loud. She had never cried like that before; at least, there was no evidence of such crying in her memory. It made her feel primal, like an infant. She felt she had arrived here on the giant wave of all her composite experiences, been intended to feel this, behave this way, shed her daily concerns, her rationality, all but feeling. This was the moment the child in her – the one she *was* – disappeared for good, and a grown woman arrived in her place. That would be worth the struggle of this. She stayed there as the night grew dark, her nerve-knotted body sobbing toward sleep.

When she woke up, gluey and swollen, the tricks began. Plates of food and teas arrived at her doorstep every couple of hours, and she devoured them. She sucked down pasty soups strong with herbs and drank rich liquids that swallowed slowly and lit her throat on fire. She hummed songs, but did not pray. She did yoga poses until her muscles were threadbare. Madly craving cigarettes, she ground her teeth. She pulled her own hair until her scalp ached and she bit her nails until the cuticles filled with blood.

She tested each tongue-bud and cheek cell and neural corridor to the point where pain breaks into numbness. Her calves, her abdomen, her back, her throat. She felt that every part of her should be in pain, or the act was worthless.

On the morning of the third day, she crawled to the toilet, thoroughly sick,

vomiting and lined in sweat. She stayed there for hours, the room thick with human odors. When the floor ran dark with blood, she screamed for Bête.

She told Kim all about what happened in the cabin, and her mother, and Nour, who was enchanted by her tale. She wrote an essay about the experience that she tried, unsuccessfully, to sell to the *New York Times*.

The release of the embryo had been a triumph. A devilish contract, Dorie felt, but the outcome was joyous. She was alive and alone once again, exuberant with ownership of her body. She had found an answer in the plants, in the spells of a witch, in the rhythms of nature from whence her woes had come, and she'd used those forces to bend the shape of her life.

Gabriel drove Kim to the airport early enough to take her time with a cup of coffee. She found a perch at an observation window where she could sip and watch the planes. The metal birds moved from their gates; ant-like baggage trucks bustled in the cold haze. The sun broke over the tarmac, bathing it in infrared shine.

She wasn't pregnant yet, and she was glad for that right now. If she had been, her thoughts would be turned inward, hindering her ability to be there for someone else. She didn't know what it would be like to see Dorie after all these years – they kept up, something remained, but their friendship had lost most of its intimacy. The years apart had cooked the distance between them into something solid, making the bond they had as younger people seem ever more precious and fragile.

Dorie served as a vehicle for nostalgia, a representative of years past. She was like a declining celebrity, a stained starlet whose story must be followed and whose name

conjured fondness, but whose narrative was quickly losing cachet.

Why did she entertain their friendship if she got so little from it? Was she in it for the superior feeling, some relief it gave her about her own life? Did she love Dorie, or did she want the pride of saving her? The more she stared at the lines, the more they blurred.

Each time a call came, Dorie held Kim's attention on the line with astonishing ease and control. Kim hadn't flown out to see her during her first pregnancy or her second. She didn't consider it. Something about the repetition made this third time different. A second pregnancy *could* be an accident, it could be called miscalculation, or a desperate reach toward a fresh wound. Dorie was one to experiment – different man, different sex, different outcome. Kim could understand it, in a way. But a third! Could it be anything *but* an intention?

She was determined not to take a side or to judge – she, after all, did not think of abortion as a sin or a cowardly out, and arguing a side would be useless in any case. Dorie *tried* to be contrary, to effect tension.

Kim went to her gate and boarded the plane, stuffing her small bag under the seat and resting her forehead on the window. Her mind felt crammed with words until the airplane lifted. It was a clear day. The eastern mountains were soft on her eyes, and although the trees were bare, the landscape looked lush and moist compared to the coarse, craggy west.

Dorie pulled up to the terminal in an Oldsmobile with salt spots on the windows and dusty wheels. Her face and fingers looked thin. She wore a loose plaid shirt and worked-over jeans, her eyes hidden by dark glasses. Black hair fell past her shoulders in

rich waves.

“Hi,” Dorie said, lowering her glasses and giving a small, tight smile. The whites of her eyes were wild with veins. She pulled back the emergency brake and opened her arms.

“It is so good to see you,” Kim said. Dorie’s glasses fell between them. Winter static raised the ends of Kim’s hair.

“How was your flight?” Dorie asked.

“People always ask about that,” Kim said. “It’s never interesting.”

“Flights themselves never are,” Dorie said, wheeling the car into the left lanes.

“But maybe you had an epiphany on the plane. Or met a pair of ancient twins.”

“No epiphany,” Kim said. “No twins.” She took inventory of the car. It contained a good deal of garbage – candy wrappers, shopping bags – but the upholstery looked new, or well cared for. “Is this yours?”

Dorie laughed loudly. “What do you think?” She looked sideways at Kim, who didn’t answer because she didn’t have any idea. “You look smashing. *Sophisticated*. You look like a Kennedy.”

“Thanks,” Kim said. It did not sound like a compliment. “Really, is this your car?”

“It is today,” Dorie said. “I borrowed it for you.”

“Oh.” Kim smiled. She smoothed her hair down and settled back for the drive.

The flat land east of the mountains was a patchwork of dying grasses and baled hay. Every house was the color of dusk or milk. As they drove west, the heathery, snow-salted Rockies grew in stature and barnyard scents lifted in favor of smoke and pine.

Fences made of gray-brown beams had crooked high-water lines drawn by the mineral content of past snows. They drove in silence; it righted them. The glances and half-smiles felt sturdier than words. Coming up on the mountains, the roads became sinuous and slow.

“I thought we’d have lunch at home,” Dorie said.

“I would love that.”

Dorie turned the car into an alley and parked.

“I failed to clean for your arrival,” she said.

“Okay,” Kim said.

They walked inside her home, a guesthouse behind a larger house at the base of the foothills. It was sparsely furnished and smelled like food, and was filled edge to edge with piles of papers, books and records. The walls were busy with artwork, finished and otherwise. Lamps teetered on leaning towers of books and every shelf was lined with small candles. There were two rooms, one with a bed, one with a couch, and around the corner was a kitchenette. Kim read the clutter and Dorie watched her eyes travel.

“Please be at home, Kimsy. Go for it. Explore, pee, change clothes, check e-mail, whatever you need to do. I started a stew this morning,” Dorie said.

“Smashing,” Kim said. Kim set her travel bag down, unlaced her boots, and went into the bathroom. She closed the toilet lid and sat on it to dial the phone.

“Well, I’m here,” she said.

“Great,” Gabriel said. “How is she? Is she different?”

“She’s always different,” Kim whispered. “We haven’t talked yet. I don’t know what to say. She seems like a mess.”

“A mess how?”

“Childish. Unhealthy. I don’t know. Physically messy.”

“Okay, we knew that.”

“It’s screwy, talking to you about this here. She’s making stew.”

“She’s a wonderful cook.”

“Yes,” Kim said. “I’m gonna go, just wanted to let you know I got in.”

Kim came out of the bathroom to see that candles had been lit. Dorie was setting the coffee table. Her eyes caught Kim’s directly for the first time; they were wide and gray, with the scuffed shine of old coins. Dorie’s movements halted then, as minute as the pause of a pendulum, and then restarted. She parceled out bowls of hot, speckled stew. They sat down across from each other and Dorie ripped two chunks of bread from a warm loaf.

Kim considered asking a question or trying to make a joke. She focused on the stew. “This is terrific.”

“Posole,” she said. “I got this recipe from a real life Mexican cowboy.”

“Of course you did.” Kim smiled. “I love it.” She inspected the contents of her bowl, poking ribbons of cabbage and tender pork tissue. Her friend could cook, it was true. She thought of her own efforts, which were boring at best. “So,” she said.

“So,” Dorie said. “I have stopped smoking.”

“That seems smart,” Kim said. “I’ve quit too.”

“Yeah. It’s going well. I still get cravings, but I’ll just go do something else. Eat a cookie, do a headstand, change the subject.”

“So what does that mean?” Kim asked.

“I don’t know, what do you think it means?” Dorie looked at her and slurped daintily from her spoon.

“If you’ve decided, you should be able to say it,” Kim said. She noticed a mothering tone in her voice and tried to fish it out.

“It means I’m thinking of having it but I’m not sure,” Dorie said. “Do you think I’d need you here if I’d decided?”

“I’m not sure you need me here.” Kim smiled weakly. “But I’m happy I came. How are things with Nour?”

Dorie was quiet for a moment, and then it all rolled out in a pressurized voice. “I love him. He is goodness and grace, it’s all over his face. Every time I look at him I see a family. He’s young. I’m young, whatever, in some ways. He doesn’t have much money. I don’t have money. We’re ill-equipped. He doesn’t know where he’ll live next month or how to pay for his car wreck last summer. He wants to do what I want to do. There is a part of me,” Dorie began braiding a strand of hair that had fallen near her face, “a part of me thinks this is how families start. As messes. A bunch of ingredients in a pan.”

“We all got here somehow. They can end as messes, too.”

“Can’t they? So what do we do, then. Do we avoid them because we can? That’s silly, right? But here I am.”

“Is it fear?” Kim sopped up the last of her stew with the bread. “You’re wondering if you’re capable?”

“I’m capable,” she said. “I am capable.”

“Imagine you didn’t have an option,” Kim said. “Imagine you were having this baby, definitely. What would you do next?”

“I’d cope,” she said. “I’d shift into some other gear. I’d clean the house, I’d buy the vitamins, I’d probably, I don’t know, get married.”

“What’s the scariest part of that?”

“I don’t know.” Dorie licked invisible crumbs from her lip. She glanced away.

“Think about it. What part of that scares you?”

“All of it.”

“Gabe and I are pretty happy,” Kim said. “A lot of good stuff comes with having a partner. I come home to foot rubs and he helps around the house. We share health insurance. To have two families instead of one ... two sets of parents, two support networks ... somehow it dilutes the terrifying *importance* of everything.”

“If I have this baby fearfully, it will be *cursed* with fear.”

“Don’t have it fearfully. And by the way, nothing’s cursed.”

“I might be.”

“That’s insane.”

“You’re different than me.” Dorie shook out her braid and stacked the bowls.

“Everyone’s different than everyone, but we pretty much want the same things.”

Kim saw that Dorie’s eyes had gone cold. She knew she was misstepping – Dorie’s identity was her specialness, her unpredictability, and Kim had cast her as just another hungry human.

“I want different things all the time. One hour to the next.”

“Is there anything you can be sure you *don’t* want?”

“Sure, tons of things. I don’t want this conversation, for instance. I don’t want this to be decided by fear or by you. I want it to be a natural progression, a shift in the

atmosphere, a thrilling turn I take in stride.” Her voice had grown loud and brassy. Kim held calm.

“Then stop worrying about it. Take a chance, have a baby. You’re already on your way. It’s what people do.”

“I’m going for a walk.”

Kim stood up. “What did I say?”

“I don’t know. I am going for a walk.”

“May I join you?” Kim fought off a smile. “That sounds good, a walk. I’ll wash these dishes and we’ll go.”

Dorie looked at her, her eyes as clear and empty as bubbles.

“We can leave the dishes,” Kim said.

“That’s fine,” Dorie said, in a voice that meant otherwise. In a ruffle of motion, she prepared to go out. She wrapped herself in a gigantic red scarf and pawed through a closet for mittens and boots. She checked her appearance in the mirror and then changed the scarf. Kim came up behind her in the reflection.

“Which one, Kimsy?” she asked.

“Red,” Kim said.

Dorie pinched out the candles and the women left the house, walking east, away from the mountains’ feet.

“What’s this way?”

“Nothing,” Dorie said. “Farms.”

They walked quickly, working up heat, their noses pink. Kim thought of Gabriel’s old advice – *Quickest way to change the feeling in a room is to change your physical*

state. When he and Kim fought their way into a standstill, he'd go to the fridge and take out the jar of hot peppers. They'd fill their mouths with chiles, chew them up until they were hopping around the room in agony, and then wait for the searing to subside. When it did, the mood was new.

Kim and Dorie walked through curving neighborhood streets until they came to plots of gridded land with big haystacks and half-mile driveways.

"I hate it out here," Dorie said. Kim looked around. In each direction, tension swelled. The mountains were grand and moodily beautiful and the farm plots were flat and organized, populated with dull-eyed animals. Those creatures probably stared up at the mountains all day, Kim thought, as they munched food and waited to die. She noticed Dorie's defiant step, her bobbing black hair. Her cheeks were blotched with yellows and reds, the nostrils shiny around the edges and threatening to run. Her eyes were busy, zooming around. Kim was hit by a strong thirst, like a dry rag tickling her throat. She fell slightly behind Dorie. It was as if they caged each other by matching stride.

As they circled back home, Dorie was far ahead of Kim. The neighborhoods were denser here, the houses smaller. It was dark and the air smelled of burning leaves. They passed yellow lawns lined with brittle dandelions and the last stretch was uphill. Kim sweated inside her clothes. When they got back to the house, Dorie filled two Mason jars full of cold tap water and handed one to Kim. They drank, refilled the jars, and drank again.

"I love the water here," Kim said.

"Yeah," said Dorie, her lips wet. "I love it too."

"How are you feeling?"

“You know, I feel pretty great,” Dorie said. Kim remembered: here was Dorie’s particular sort of dominance, rearing its head. If she couldn’t have full control over a moment, she could still catch her audience by surprise. “Can I ask you for a favor, Kimsy?”

“You can ask me anything.”

“Will you help me straighten up my house? I’ve been trying to organize my world, but I just can’t do it myself. I lose interest after ten minutes.”

“Hmm,” Kim said, looking at the piles around them. It was more than an evening’s work. “If I help, will you give me a haircut?”

Dorie’s face bloomed into a smile. “Sure.”

They worked together, grouping papers, shelving books, wiping counters, and gathering coins and knickknacks from under the couch and between cushions. They used butter knives to chip dried wax and gunk from the wooden floors, they scrubbed the hardware in the kitchen and bathroom, they gathered an immense, colorful pile of laundry.

They ordered a pizza. After eating, Kim pulled a stool up to the kitchen counter, where Dorie sat, her legs dangling, with a pair of scissors and a comb. Quickly and tenderly, Dorie cut Kim’s hair, giving shape to what had been flat, long, and lifeless. Hair dropped in wet crescents on the floor while Kim kept still. As she cut, Dorie talked about her relationship with Nour.

“I assume the sex is still amazing,” Kim said.

“*Ha*. It’s the stuff dreams are made of, Kimsy.”

“Oh?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know. It’s a new thing every time, really. It feels like work, heart-wrenching, muscle-straining work and it goes on forever, and then we both dissolve into cream. It’s like climbing a giant, frightening tree and finding a waterslide at the top.”

Kim laughed. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” The word trailed, and she brushed the bits of hair from Kim’s neck and shoulders. “Are you and Gabriel having hot married sex?”

Kim adjusted her posture. “It’s not like it was. We’re trying for a baby now – did you know that? So it’s different, a little like, I don’t know, performing for the Queen as opposed to rocking out in your own garage. The pressure inhibits feeling.”

“I’m sure you can rock out in front of the Queen,” Dorie said. “Just pretend you’re in the garage.”

“I’m not a pretender,” Kim said.

“That’s true.”

Dorie set down the scissors.

“I’m exhausted,” she said. Kim nodded.

She created a comfortable bed for Kim on the couch, with its own flannel sheets and multiple pillows and a soft, worn-to-nubbins quilt. They said good night to each other and went to sleep.

Kim woke late. Light entered the room brokenly, through a mess of bare branches. She rinsed out the night's dishes and put on a pot of coffee. She drank water and used the toilet. She was careful to tread quietly.

She cracked open an ancient-looking anatomy book that caught her eye from the

shelf. She thought of things to make for breakfast that would make it seem like an occasion – French toast, a fruit parfait, poached eggs with greens. Dorie’s body was changing, though, and she was the better cook. She would have a specific idea of what to eat for breakfast.

As it neared ten, Kim became deeply aware of her hunger. She poked around the kitchenette looking for ingredients. Four eggs. A cut lemon. A canister of oats. Leftover pizza. An end of the bread loaf from the day before, a jar of grape jelly. She spread jelly on the bread, drained the last of the coffee, and went back to the couch.

Around eleven, she located a clean towel and ran a bath. She lathered up with the milky, scented soaps stacked around the edges of the tub. She washed her hair. She closed her eyes in the bath and lay there, breathing. She dried slowly and rubbed lotion into her skin. She dressed, went to the couch, and saw that she had missed a call from Gabriel. She picked up the phone and sat down, and when she did, she saw a handwritten note on top of the anatomy book.

Dear Kimsy: I’ve gone out for today. Please don’t be angry with me. I had to. There should be plenty for you to eat. Be at home. No extra key – don’t lock the door if you leave. Ta, ta. – D”

Below the words, Dorie had drawn a crude, cartoonish picture of a dark bird: a raven, heavy winged, with stern eyes. In the raven’s beak hung a blanket, in which a newborn slept.

Kim walked outside, the frosty concrete burning her feet. The car was gone.

She went inside. She continued to make pots of coffee, although she was quite awake. She picked at the contents of the fridge.

“What does that mean?” she asked aloud. “What the hell does that mean?”

As her day progressed, she imagined what kind of day Dorie was having. She knew the story of the old woman, and she thought of Dorie, intelligent Dorie, clacking around in a cabin talking to the sky. The little house of Dorie’s made her angry, with its freshly straightened shelves. She called for a taxi.

The airline put Kim on standby for a flight that day. She bought a fat bestseller and tried to read. She was on edge, her blood rushing, almost itching. Her skin was dry, her lips too. She called Gabriel and left a message. “I’ll be home tonight,” she said, “please don’t make me take the bus.”

The source of her anger was a mystery. She hadn’t wanted to coerce Dorie, she felt sure of that.

She was last to board her plane. In the center of the row sat a large woman in a baseball cap, talking on the phone.

“This is me,” Kim said, nudging her. “Seat D.”

“No problem,” the woman said. She wedged into the aisle to let Kim pass and resumed her conversation.

“I am so proud of you,” the woman said into the phone. “It has been such a good year.” Kim saw a shine in the woman’s eyes and she tried to guess the feat being celebrated, whether the person on the other line was the woman’s child. Her voice had depth and sincerity. Not the kind of voice you could get without enduring difficult intimacy, without working at love.

The captain and flight staff made their announcements. When the plane rose up, Kim leaned back. Dorie would need her eventually, she’d call again with some new,

glorious problem. Through the window Kim watched the airport change scale, the ground and its browns crackling in their pattern of grooves and peaks, and the mountains gave way to a gentler, wetter landscape, as if it were old bread being turned back to dough.

As she drove, Dorie fought through chunks of falling guilt. She didn't *want* this now, she had *choices*, people *change their minds*.

She thought of Kim – Kim *was* a parent, she behaved as one already. She had absorbed from the world the distinct qualities shared by good caretakers and they were hers to use when the time came. It was infuriating. She would know how to act, how to be poised in the waiting room, the right questions to ask. No doctor would look at Kim suspiciously, as if she were an overgrown child in borrowed clothes.

It was winter and the cabin would be an icy place. It might give her what she wanted to feel – that delicious, hard pain. But it was possible that her witch had died, or left, and then? All paths she could see led inward to a nest of widowed questions. There were options, she knew. She could do whatever she wanted now, but it wouldn't matter. She would remain with her nature; a thing she thought, once, she had caught by the tail.

The Summer Queen

I have all these memories of her, my old friend May.

We occupy a bathroom in a dive bar in a ghost town, and she is terribly sick.

We swim in a deep, bright river.

We eye a rundown space for lease in west Phoenix. May foresees it as the hub of some small, important cultural renaissance. We'll set up a café in the style of a salon and convince interesting people to come there, play bridge and dance and curse and light each other's herbal cigarettes. *The illusion of revival comes first*, she says, and the words strike me like a match.

We sit face to face in the middle of an empty room, neither blinking until she blows a puff of air across my eyelashes and whispers, "this is life."

We talk on the phone because she's far away. She's on some kind of new drug, or binge. She sounds muffled, as though her voice is wrapped in cloth.

We pause at the place where the grass meets the sand, and May is in the form of ash inside a tin. I set her down beside a pile of garbage the sea brought in, and then I walk away.

There is work to do when anyone dies.

There is work to do when anyone dies, but when the person is as young as May was, that work is slow.

The work is to unlatch and honor the part of her spirit she did not live long

enough to nurture. She died at twenty-five. I imagine her in the years beyond, unlived years. I see her a little ways out from here, having changed beyond what she was like when I knew her, less impulsive, beside a partner, with children, her waist full, dark crescents developing under her eyes. I imagine the sadness of her imaginary children to have never lived. It's both painful and ludicrous, but I do it, and when I have done it long enough I imagine May a little older, at forty-five or fifty, guiding her offspring out into adulthood. I imagine the sadness of her imagined partner to have lost those later golden years with her, not yet tarnished with disease and no longer hustling for money. I keep doing this work, this work of imagining and mourning her unlived years, until she has lived a long life within my mind and the death feels justified.

When I look up from this mourning I feel tiny but I find that I have aged, parts of me have died, and I will need to build new parts.

She has been dead almost a year now. I'm twenty-five and still here, behaving a bit like a car that's stalled out on the side of some whizzing highway. From here our friendship is beginning to seem fairly naive and flawed, and yet more valid than anything else I have. I can feel its reality living within me, informing my state of mind, in a way I can't feel anything else, including a connection to those people who raised me and the sixteen years of school I mindfully attended.

Here's the worst of it: without her my life doesn't excite me. My work doesn't excite me. Looking at the lives of my parents inspires no confidence that anything will ever excite me. This is the problem with being dazzled into a daze by the heat of other people. If the spark goes out, the cold is colder and you realize you never figured out how to make your own warmth.

I took an airplane to California when I set May's ashes to rest. I'd hardly ever ridden in planes. The ride stimulated something in me; so elegant, so strong. The dip of the wing as it comes in to land; the feeling of coasting through space, wide-eyed, in a chair. The ride home was the same. When I walked off the plane, I caught a look at the pilot – a sensible-looking woman, smooth and self-assured.

I take what money I have from a few years working in the pizza kitchen. I find a place to start.

It's our third class. Mr. Shin, my instructor, is talking about the ritual of flight.

"Eventually this will become instinctive for you all," he says, correcting, "or for all of you that make it that far. All pilots have a rhythm, and you have to find it for yourself. This sounds a little wild to you because you're nowhere near that point yet, but one day you will be. Some pilots are jazzier than others - I am like that, for example. For me flying is a syncopated experience. For you it might be languorous, more like a sonata."

A classmate calls out from the back row. "Could you explain what you mean in mechanical terms?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the mechanics," Mr. Shin says, smiling to himself. "High cognitive functions are like this, and the closest analogy I have for you is literacy. When young people learn how to read." He pauses in a dramatic way, lifting a hand. "You can't make sense of the letters and sounds until one day out of nowhere you can, and from there you can't unlearn them, and you have control of the information's flow. In your

eyes, now, the cockpit is a jungle. My hope is that one day you will swing from the branches."

He is not teaching us anything about learning to fly, but selling us on the concept of flying planes ourselves, and I resent him for it.

He swivels in his loafers and inserts a disc into the DVD player, and we watch flight videos with his occasional commentary. I'm resistant to Mr. Shin's poetics about ascent and descent, rhythm, rising, falling.

I want logistics, steps to memorize.

I want to work, not be impressed.

I want to be tested – pre-tested – for the vocation. I want to know if I can do this before my aspirations amplify and I find out later I'm unfit.

I've watched things dutifully all my life. Always watched, rarely done. The sensation of watching planes take off and land on video reminds me of being a kid on a field trip to the art museum. I was shy before the framed paintings. *What should I think about?* I asked the teacher, peering at piles of color. *Anything*, she'd said, and my mind shut off. There's trouble with *anything*: it doesn't sound like anything at all.

Mr. Shin pauses the video to rhapsodize about the thrill of pulling together a smooth landing from difficult ingredients. I look around at my classmates; their interest is real, physical. They are attracted to his romantics in a way I am not.

Avoiding contact with Mr. Shin's eyes, I gather my books and walk out the door of the room, faster down the hallway, and out the doors of the building.

It's not a short walk across the quad to the parking lot. By the time I get to the car, I have solved something. This flying planes thing will not stick because it's a path built

on a lie. It's not important to me to pilot planes, not at all. Perhaps I only wanted something good to say when people asked what I was up to. What was important to me must have been to be something that sounds important, something that people can comprehend as having value. Something they can point to and admire.

May's parents gave me the car, a white Mercedes from the 1980s, after her death. There is a hula dancer on the dashboard who moves when I hit the brakes. It had been May's first car, used when her parents bought it. We took it everywhere we could think to go, to Oaxaca, Vegas, Hollywood.

I lean the driver's seat back a few inches and look up at the roof, feeling ill. I wait for the sensation to pass and drive home, lie on my back in bed, and look up at the ceiling fan. It looks nothing like the car's rooftop lining but it also makes me feel ill.

After finishing college, I sent out resumes every week. Sales, inventory control. Car rental companies. Pornographic website billing. Everything I saw an ad for. My degree turned out to be less valuable than a cookie in my purse. I had worked hard for my grades in school, but I never could transform the things I had learned into actions in the moments those actions would have been most useful. I was too stubborn to ask for what I needed most, which was usually advice. Other people just seemed to know what to do, how to act, what to ask, how to dress for things. They went forth from the university and did work in tall buildings, and they were given money, and from where I sat the transition was no more complicated than stepping from one moving staircase to another.

Failure turned me despondent, even a little cracked. I couldn't answer questions in

a way that people liked to hear. I answered honestly. When asked what my goals were, I would say things like “that’s not really the point, here, is it?”

I applied for credit cards, which for a while always took me on.

My family was on the poorer end of things, both parents scraping. Going home was not an option. “Try not to have any kids yet,” was what my mom said. “You don’t know poor until there’s another one of you running around asking for things.”

My school friends came from wealthy boomer families mostly, folks from all over the country who’d made fortunes on real estate or the markets back when that sort of thing happened. Some moved in with their parents when the chips were down and worked upward from internships to staff positions. They looked for work longer than expected but eventually landed somewhere reputable, or profitable. In the years after school, their clothes and cars kept getting nicer, and even their voices changed, as if their words were dipped in silver water before spoken. Because they felt sorry for me, I stopped wanting to see them, and naturally, they stopped wanting to spend time with me too.

May, who after college formally renounced traditional avenues of moneymaking, lived the life of living off *charm*, which often meant *other people*, a tactic I did not have the prowess for. I envied her, I lived through her, and we managed to stay close. I did not judge her the way our other friends did. I liked her. She helped me escape my disappointments. She ate well, slept well, got laid plenty and until the drug-addled demise she aged beautifully, having apparently zero qualms about taking chances and appropriating her strengths.

I’d have been her if I could.

When Pizza Fresca offered me – hungry and humble, with my leaning tower of credit card bills – an apron and a visor, I was thankful.

I wonder sometimes now if May ever actually understood some things I understood. She *did* things, of course, she wheeled and dealt through life, tasting everything, teaching me how to snatch fleeting pleasures from the air and to ignore what people thought. But I didn't have her talent for negotiating appearances and I never would. I couldn't fill out a dress like her, and I could never light up a room on my own.

I visit Mr. Shin in his office at the school, a dusty room with yellowing light and wooden chairs that remind me of schoolhouses from the pioneer era. Tacked up on the wall behind him are posters from the time of World War II, rosy drawings of pin-up princesses posing beside biplanes. A dreamer.

"Lizzy?" he says, as if to confirm he's pronouncing it right, the same voice he uses to take attendance. This will be our first one-on-one conversation.

"That's me," I say. He paws through a stack of papers on his desk for a clean sheet and snaps a retractable pen from his shirt pocket. He's a handsome old man, Mr. Shin - slim and strong, his skin the color of a mellow cup of tea, eyes deep and sparkling, hair neatly kept and white. A gold wedding band catches my eye.

"Not Elizabeth," he says.

"No. Lizzy." I straighten up. The man has impressive posture; he makes me want it too.

"I came to apologize for my behavior in class. For leaving like that. It felt

disrespectful.”

“It's not an issue.” He smiles generously.

“I thought you might say that. But you put a lot of thought into that lecture, and it just wasn't hitting me in the right way – I have been inside my head a little bit lately.”

“You have things going on in your life, I presume, that have nothing to do with what kind of preparation I do for my lecture.” He smiles again and does a hand gesture that seems to mean *continue*. “What else can I help you with?”

“I need to withdraw from the curriculum,” I blurt. The news comes as a surprise to us both.

He pauses. “Oh.”

“Yeah. I'm afraid so.”

“What's your reasoning there?”

“I don't want to be a pilot,” I say, helplessly.

“Why did you enroll in the class?”

I don't answer.

“You don't want to be a pilot? Or you don't think you can do it?”

“Both.”

“Well,” he says. Mr. Shin leans back, eyeing me with controlled suspicion. “We're past the refund deadline now. I suppose you've got a lot of money lying around?”

I shrug, mostly to keep from wincing.

“What kind of work did you leave to be a pilot?” he asks.

Now he's looking at me closely. I think I know what he sees.

“I've been working at a pizza restaurant,” I say. “Pizza Fresca, up on McClintock.

The money isn't bad, it's enough for me, no kids and all. It wasn't about flying," I say. A note of desperation in my voice glints like glass. "I think it was more about escape."

"That was my instinct, too, once upon a time," he says. "You know, you didn't need to come talk to me to withdraw from the program."

"I came to apologize."

"Also unnecessary."

"I was raised to be considerate."

"It's your money."

"Do you want me to leave?"

He is quiet. I see him swallow. "Unless you have any questions for me," he says, reaching for a pair of glasses.

"No."

"Thanks for playing, Lizzy Stapleton," he says, making a hand motion that seems to mean *goodbye*.

I leave Mr. Shin's office feeling both small and defiant. The registrar's office is open, I know, but I walk back to the old Mercedes and drive home to prepare for my evening shift at Pizza Fresca.

When I arrive for work the pie-dough station is covered in corn flour. Octavio mans it, tossing a wad of cold dough from hand to hand like a ball player smacking his mitt. He smiles "hello" and nods and I tie back my apron and wash my hands.

Summer is long in Arizona and so are the days. The pizza kitchen has big

windows, and this has come to matter a lot to me over the years. I work the six to close shift now, ever since Mr. Shin's class began. We can see out across the four-lane street to an open field. Pizza Fresca is not in much of a neighborhood; there's an office park close by and a smattering of residences. On temperate nights, which is most of the year, a handful of kids will get together and play pickup soccer or baseball and stay past dark, playing by the light of the street lamps, using old bottles for bases and goalposts. When business is slow, we'll bet on the games.

"How's flight class going, Lizzy?" he asks. He likes the idea of me being a pilot.

"Oh, you know."

"I don't know."

I put together a smile for him and place two onions on the chopping block.

"I don't think I'm gonna stick with it, actually," I say, slicing the bulbs.

He pauses with the dough. "Is it too late to change your mind?"

"It was just an idea."

He sets his dough down loudly on the corn flour.

"Everything is an idea until you do it," he says. "*You* were just an idea until your parents *did* it."

There's a serious aspect to what he's saying. I look him in the eye.

"I'm getting mixed signals from the world," I say.

Octavio's eyes bug out and he laughs. "The whole world. The whole world is talking to you. I love this. What signals are you talking about?"

I don't quite know, so I keep slicing the onions and putting them into the toppings bin. I don't believe in signs, not exactly; what I believe in are patterns. The stories printed

in the national papers and on the nightly news about poor folks making it big all over the country, people apparently lifting themselves up out of the soil by virtue of brow sweat and secret talents buried deep in their bellies. Those stories contain patterns that I've attempted, diligently, to copy.

I can feel him staring as I think.

"It's like: do this, do that, make something of yourself, take risks but also, you know, be pragmatic and save your money," I say.

He shakes his head.

"No, no no. I don't think you understand what is meant by taking risks. Risk is trading a sure thing for an uncertainty. What risks have you taken? You have a what, a business degree?" he picks the dough back up. "The world is talking to itself, it's not talking specifically to you. The world doesn't even *know* you, you could be anybody."

"I've taken risks," I say, stacking cans of tomato puree. "I've lived a little."

"Like how?" he says, mimicking the tone of a teenage girl.

I hold onto the answer for a moment. What comes to mind, of course, are things I did with May. Wind whipping through the open windows of a Mercedes from the 80s on our way east, or south, or north. Kissing strange men in strange places. Eating full meals of free hot peppers and ice water at the Mexican places along the highway to Vegas, and coming back high, fast and loose with our pockets full of money after she bet our paychecks on some number in red. Riding around with the goddess of winning or losing it all, with the siren of an age when such things felt real.

"You're still living, a little," Octavio says. "Keep that in mind, ok? You don't need to stick around here all your life. You can negotiate what you want, or some things you

want, it just takes time.”

His words affect me in a way I don’t like. I almost snap back with a question about his life. I watch him twirling the dough. He may be a happy person. It’s hard to say. Back in Sonoita he was a pharmacist. I don’t know why he packed it all up to come here. When I’ve asked, he’s shrugged, as if to say it was a simple thing, trading steady, respectable work in one land for a hidden life in another. Some things about him I can’t guess.

“I’m really pissed about this, Octavio.”

“What are you pissed about again?”

“I knew it, I just *knew* that when I grew up I would be okay. I’d have a role to play, a little stack of business cards to give out. I did all the right things.” I hear these stupid words barreling out of my mouth and into the air, screechy and unhinged.

Octavio starts laughing and fails to catch the dough. It drops, pierced through by the table’s corner, and oozes down the steel leg to the floor.

“That is funny!”

He’s laughing hard enough that after a little while I have to start laughing, too.

During the after-dinner slump, I join Octavio and Cory, one of the delivery drivers, in the walk-in freezer. Cory produces a joint and we smoke it in the cold room.

“How’s it going, Lizzy,” Cory says, looking me up and down. He’s not an attractive guy, but some part of me is glad for the attention. I watch how he sucks on the paper, closing his eyes, expanding his lungs until he can’t take in any more.

“Pretty good,” I say. “An easy night.”

Cory lets the smoke out, filling the room.

“Hey, you want to come by my place for a beer after closing?”

“No, I don’t,” I say, surprised at my own directness.

I can feel Octavio watching me, approvingly, from the side. I take the joint and breathe in, feeling relieved.

At the end of my shift, after the money is counted and locked away, I drive home in the old Mercedes. It’s starting to feel like an awful car for me, a false skin. I wonder if I could sell it for much, what its value to a stranger would be.

When I pull into my apartment lot, I lean my head back and relax for a while in the car. Memories of May parade through mind like film sequences from a bygone era. So vivid when active, and yet I’m starting to see how I might be able to contain them, as a collector keeps lengths of precious celluloid inside a case.

This is how we meet: She confronts me at a party where I’d been watching her. *Why don’t you like me*, she demands to know. *You scare me*, I say, honesty out to get me once again. Her eyes gleam at this. *You scare me too. It’s power. It means we’re powerful*, she says.

Years later, after finishing school, May has conned both our ways in to a hotel party full of rich young people. There’s a convention in town for eventual leaders. Women wear heels and tight skirts, men wear collared shirts with their neckties loose. May wears blue jeans and cowboy boots, and she moves around the room like a leaf on a breeze, spouting theories of happiness, self-reliance, sexual liberation. She is pure, audacious American vigor, and she commands almost every eye in the room, but not mine, not quite mine. I’m focused inward, utterly depressed.

The last memory of us together surges. We lie across the open doorway to my fourth-floor apartment, our faces at the plane where the overhang ends. “What’s wrong?” she asks. “I’m not like you,” I tell her, “and sometimes that makes me feel terrible around you.” Weather is close; the air thickens. For what feels like hours, we are quiet. “I’ll leave you alone, then, Lizzy,” she says, giving me a long, hard look. “Maybe you’re just not very strong.” She shakes her head, disappointed in me. It hurts; I can feel the sting of it even in retrospect. She presses up to her feet and walks off, driving away in the white car. I’ll hear from her again, but she won’t visit. I lay across the threshold, imagining she might come back to save me from my own loose ends, telling me I’m strong and powerful after all. She doesn’t. I spend the night in the doorway alone, watching the sky bruise and shine with summer storm.

Come Down to the Water

We are made of star stuff, Carl Sagan says. All the scientists say this, including the religious ones – or so Alex tells me. Break it down far enough and we are made of the same root *business* as all other things; things, like chimps or our mothers, that we kind of resemble, and things, like washing machines and natural bridges, that we do not. We are like pharaohs, Ford F-150s, and fire. It is only measurement, placement, structure, that makes things as different from each other as they seem to be.

I ask about intangibles.

“Emotions? Are they that way? Is fear the same stuff as, say, confidence?” He fends me off with a tweak of my nipple.

“You,” he says, “ask too many freaking questions.”

“Sensory stuff? Sounds, rhythms, smells? Are they made of the same things as each other? I should take a physics class.”

“They wouldn't let you,” he says. “They can tell an impostor a mile away.”

“But what's an impostor, if we're all the same, so nearly the same. Look at you, impersonating a star.”

“You're always trying so hard to be funny,” he says. “You're never going to be funny if you keep putting in this kind of effort.”

“Oh,” I say, and ponder this. “Is humor the same stuff as stuff that isn't humor?”

His eyes close and his mouth stretches in fake pain. “The badness of your jokes,” he says, “physically hurts me. It's partner abuse.”

“Okay okay,” I say. But I know my jokes are part, if not most, of what he likes

about me. “Touch my nipple again.” He does. I writhe a little.

“What are we, then?” I ask.

“My best guess,” he says softly, “is that we are what we do and feel. We are what we affect and how we affect it. We're feeling and movement. Energy containers, participants in a great, cosmically insignificant energy show.”

I picture cans of demystified souls pouring out into the atmosphere, a scene that strikes me as hectic and sad.

Alex is a scientist. In some circles, he was famous for it. He could turn an average cell into another, more exotic kind of cell, and although that is as sophisticated an understanding as I've reached on the matter, to me that means he manipulates the very substance of life and that's wizardry. I believe the things Alex tells me, but the things he tells me do not seem real.

The room has no smell, no grime, no clutter. It's neither warm nor cool. Lying in the puffy white bed belonging to no one, it's easy to forget the events that led us here, to retreat into the old movements until sleep falls upon us like a delicate seasoning.

We wake to a beeping clock in what Alex calls the hour of anthracite – the silvery dark hour that brightly fades. It's an older hotel and we can hear heels, the ding of the elevator, the costumed bellhop pulling back the grate. From another room I hear the high pitched whir of a hair dryer. Washington is an early-rising city. Any minute now, I'll get a parking ticket.

I have to drive home to get ready for work. We untangle ourselves and I dress and put in my contacts. Alex lies still in the bed, his waking energy assembling. He watches my movements with a gaze that reddens me, like a brand. He clears his throat.

“What are we doing for dinner?” he asks.

“I’ll make something. Come by when you’re done.”

Have a good day, we both say, and I go.

He’d brought up marriage again, nights before, marriage to *me*, all timid and unsure. He must have known I’d swim away from the bait but guessed that the mere idea would satisfy me somehow, entice me to keep up these cross-country visits with all their intensity and unsettlement. He’s become something of a bet-hedger, but I don’t see it as his fault, really.

His heart is not whole.

It almost gets buried under the currents now at work but Alex is, technically, someone’s husband. His house in Colorado is owned by two people. His wife is a memory, a missing person. A couple of her things are still around, but there has not been new evidence of her in nine years.

When he asked, “would you think of marrying me?” it was a plea for information, a selfish plea. Not a declaration of feeling, no claim of love or willingness to share and honor and provide. I heard the stinging truth: what he wants most is not specifically me in his life but rather a good marriage to override the bad one, to set his score even with the stars.

When he comes to my apartment, late in the evening, I have made a plain tomato soup and set out a carton of strawberries. I’ve eaten my share of everything. He eats his and we fumble at chatter. I pour wine. We look out the window over the low buildings, at the cathedral’s blue-lit spires.

“How long do you think it takes to build a cathedral?” I ask.

“Thirty-thousand man-hours,” he says, firmly.

“That's quite a few.” I lean forward. “I forget sometimes that these great buildings are actually built.”

He smirks at me theatrically, as if he were correcting one of his students. His left eye almost disappears into the fold of his cheek.

“As opposed to being what, Ellen?”

“Of course I know they're -”

“Hatched? Baked? Set there by the president of the clouds?”

“Hilarious, thank you. I'm saying I forget to think of what's involved in the making of things.”

He slightly shakes his head, annoyed. He checks his watch. He looks tired and well older than his age, which is thirty-four. He's getting thicker, rougher, less patient. I must look worn-down too.

“I wonder how you make it through the days without fainting from wonderment,” he says in a way that reminds me of how grumpy dads speak to their dumb wives on primetime TV.

“Don't condescend because I don't think like you.” I wiggle my wine glass. It causes the wine to spin in neat circles that I devote a lot of focus to.

“What's your airline?” I ask.

“United.”

“That's a new one.”

“I didn't book this one.”

There are things we ought to say but I'm not going to start.

It goes on like this. An impasse, a contest of pride. On a younger version of this night we'd have drunk more heavily until we were moved to kiss and so on, or until the conversation spun tears that washed clean our collective will to do better. But the returns are not as good as they used to be, I am weary of the pattern. Between the good days are months of dwindling assurance, of meeting interested men at cocktail hours and parties and not letting myself hold onto their names; of watching my own eyes develop long shadows from the great distances they are always straining to see.

We drink more and chew the strawberries until he decides it's time to leave. I walk him out and wait on the street for him to hail a cab. Traffic is light on the avenue. Cars pass and my hair flies around in the wind.

“At the risk of ruining a great night,” I say.

“But it wasn’t great.” He pauses. “Say what you need to say.”

I gather information from his eyes. They've gone dark, the way eyes do when what's coming is both dull and expected. My grasp on something starts to give way. The faculty I've refined over the years to keep track of what exactly it is we are doing with each other is blunt. I'd like to press a button for more time. I'd solve the puzzle in the comfort of an office, with a good, heavy pen and legal pad and possibly an intern. Not on the street, not while he is splitting his attention between me and finding something to take him away.

A cab catches sight of us and brakes.

Looking at him, I can see that he isn't happy, and also that he cares. His eyes are torn, his body is tired, his day was terrible, there was the time change, the early morning,

the rich wine. All the possible words hang there, waiting to have some effect. I could invoke love now. Love is part of what I feel.

“Goodbye,” I tell him.

This new word is a surprise. His hand hovers in the air for a second before falling and he looks at me directly. The driver presses the unlock button, switches off the light. I step back.

“Well, goodbye,” he says gamely, matching my tone. He moves toward the taxi and looks back, as if to say, *how else could it go?*

When I get back inside my apartment, my phone is ringing.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi,” Alex says.

“Hi,” I mention again.

We sit, holding our phones.

“We’re about to go through a tunnel,” he says. “I might lose you. If I do, I will call right back.”

“Okay.” Though no one can see me, I nod.

We don't speak. I picture him in the taxi, his eyes sad.

But as much as a person can know, I know: it's done. I don't wait to find out if the call drops, or for him to say something. Words couldn't change the solid things we now are. I set down the phone and get into bed.

The days that follow the endings of things are gummy and thick, like drying paint. I remember what my father said after quitting substances: Some bodies crave trouble. I

thought he meant the tongue, the stomach, the sex organs. Not the brain, but I suppose that was what he meant most.

I think of that pillow talk in the hotel. Loosen the arrangement, shuffle the order, kick in the scaffolding, and everything is all it doesn't seem. The brain may as well be a tongue, the heart a knuckle, the future a past.

For a few days I do simply what I need to: I treat myself like a mental patient. I take lunch at my desk, away from composure-threatening personal questions. When I come home at night, I wash my face and hair and change into sweats. I stack the mail but don't open it. My meals consist of heating and eating. I avoid the news on the TV.

This feels like mourning – mourning a plausible life, a plausible house with plausible children and pets, all that was recently alive to me in some future time.

Disinfection. Get to the center of what happened. For that, I have to consider that it was infected from the start but I chose it anyway, that I was drawn to the fact that he was a hurt man, and the fact that he and I would never be purely alone.

Her name is Ana and she is a ghost. She may not be living, but she is not surely dead, and in order to live in this world he must proceed as though she is. She haunts his life in shards; in a curly hair lying on the can of waxed beans in the back of the pantry, in questions posed by old friends who heard he got married but weren't caught up about the twist of plot. They were married almost a year when she disappeared. They dated a year before that. He came home from a conference in Munich to an emaciated cat and mail falling out of the box.

He probably should have had a funeral once, one time, get all the relevant people together and have one cathartic burning of her items. An effigy burial, some drunken

shouting at the moon. A great unleashing of piss and vinegar would have been so much better than this erratic, funereal decade.

As I'm trying to sleep, memories stir. The ones that include Alex seem to rise up and ask for my attention, but I push them out of mind.

A family camping trip. I must be about ten. My brother Liam, who is a couple years older, and my father are trying to make a campfire in a damp wood. They gather armfuls of sticks and logs, then lay them out to dry on a picnic table in the last of the sunlight. They create a teepee from the wood and kindling and my brother scrapes flint against rock until his hands bleed and he curses. Dad splashes gin on the wood pile, the last of his bottle. A spark takes. Confidence blooms. The striking fervor is renewed. My father coaches him and they work at it together. I sit with my mother on a nylon camping chair. We both feel lazy for not helping, but they're conventional men and they want to take care of this fire for us.

They do. The sticks light up. We whoop and clap and scoot the chair closer to the pit. My father holds Liam's hand for a moment there. I look at my mother, who tilts her head up to the sky, cued by a distant, muffled thunder.

Rain materializes.

"Fuck the rain," says Liam, his fingers curling and hardening, like claws.

"That," Mom says, "is not what we say," but scrawled on her face is some version of the words, fuck the rain.

My father kicks the toe of his boot repeatedly at a large rock. Liam rinses the blood from his hand. It wasn't a very good fire. But the fire was difficult so we care about it too much.

The weekend brings an unseasonably warm winter day. I go for a long run by the river, on a soft path that widens and narrows between boathouses and bare brown trees. The sky is a clean, cloudless blue. The first few miles are painful, my muscles like frozen dough. Old men in thermal underwear trot past me on the path.

Seven years. My breasts aren't as good as they used to be but my legs are pretty attractive. For me, time wasn't an issue, until suddenly it was. I instructed myself to be patient. Now I look behind me and there sit my supplest, prettiest years.

There were always questions.

"What if she comes home?" I asked him on a drive, coasting over Appalachian mountains.

"If she did that I might kill her," he said calmly, without delay. "If she's out there she's made her point very clear. Whatever classification of monster it makes me, I'd rather think of her as a victim. Not a coward, not a snake."

"Must she be one of those things?"

"Come again?"

"There's no other possibility?"

"Yeah," he said. "Think about it, Ellen."

He sounded sure, but there is such a range in which tragedies fall. There are other grotesque, non-lethal configurations that, if true, absolve her of cruelty and threaten to slice up his heart all over again and mine too.

Alex told me once about a theory of infinite copies, that everything that happens happens in every possible which way somewhere on the matrix of space and time, even

things that are quite specific. To me this means there are infinite Anas trapped in wells and mauled to the brink by bears and forced by eely religious perverts into sex slavery. Anas who, by the grace of their inimitable Ana-ness, escaped almost certain death and have been working their way back to their respective Alexes all while the Alexes circle their versions of me and all the versions of me clear for his landing.

Things like those happen in this world, once in a while.

And if there are infinite versions of me, there must also be infinite versions who don't, in fact, clear for anyone's landing. Infinite versions who do not attach, expect, or lie in wait. This exhausting idea of infinity has a kind side.

Or, it could be evaluated without thinking about her altogether. Remove her from the equation. It could be said that Alex minus the story of Ana is just another person who can't move forward on the strength of a feeling. Just another fellow out of tune.

During the last stretch of my run, time seems to shift, to slow, and I notice a greater level of detail in my surroundings. Runners and cyclists and people walking dogs pass me on the trail. I switch out my focus from thing to thing; on the distance between trees, the angles of branches, the pace of the water, the fit of someone's pants. It's the whoosh of hormones, Alex would say. Your brain is soaking in fun sauce. Of course you're seeing things differently.

Tina, my boss, has me over for afternoon tea.

“So what shall we do?” she asks and leans in. “Do you want Mo to kick him in the teeth?” She spoons honey into her tea. Mo is her husband. He's in the next room writing checks. He wouldn't kick a tire.

She met Alex five years ago, the first time he visited after I moved east. Alex and I lived together for a full month then and our history was so weak at that time that his arrival seemed to represent a real decision about us. It was the only good continuous month we've had, perhaps the second time we fell in love and the first I let anybody know about it. I'd started coming into work late, breathless. Tina, my boss, whom I'd barely known but who treated me with a kind of big-sisterly affection, was touched by this life change. Before Alex went back west to teach, she invited us over for a brunch. She fried beignets and thick bacon and eggs that we ate on benches in her garden, googoo-eyed and smiling.

A good month can ruin your life.

"Not sure what benefit that would have," I say. "But it's done. That's hard for me to say."

"Tell me everything that happened," she says gently.

"I don't know what happened," I say. "Maybe nothing did. Maybe I just got tired of thinking about it."

"That doesn't sound right."

"It wore me down."

"So much time," she says, finger-combing her brown hair and scanning my face for clues. Her hall clock clangs out the hours, as if to add emphasis to what she's saying. Tina has suspiciously good diction, like women who read fairy tales on tape. "He has had so many chances. You're beautiful and smart," she says.

"Don't say things like that." I have the flashing, ridiculous thought that Tina is breaking up with me. But it's in some way true: people like you less if they know no one

happens to be in love with you.

Dating is awful. Maybe Alex had been my intricate shield against the awfulness of dating. I brighten. “Maybe I made the whole thing up.” The surety I claimed. Men tell you what they're capable of without putting it into a sentence.

“Don't be silly,” she says, but some oddness in the way her words hit the air tells me she finds some credibility in the idea. Mo grunts in the next room. “You know, you weren't his great love, Ellen.”

Just when I pick Tina for a coward, she tells it like it is.

“Two years,” I say. Two enormous years against our weak seven. I don't need to clarify. Tina has been mindful of the details since the beginning.

“It's more than that.”

“Oh, I know that.” I disassemble a scone, pick out the raisins. “Have you ever heard this notion that there are multiple live-flesh versions of things? Infinite, even. That for the Tina and Ellen that sit on this gray sofa in Washington, DC, Planet Earth, The Milky Way ... there are alternate versions populating the vastness of space and time of us doing almost exactly or even exactly what we are doing right now, here. I guess that's what's meant by infinity. All the possible versions of a thing are present in the concept of the thing.”

Tina looks at me with concerned amusement, like a dog waiting for the release of his toy.

“Okay,” she says politely.

“It's comforting, is all. I'm just saying I'd like to believe that there is another Alex and Ellen that didn't fuck it up.”

“Then you'd have to let there be an Ana that didn't leave.”

“Or die.”

I discard this idea. The thought of none of this ever having happened would change too much of my life.

Tina sighs. “Either way, she left.”

“True.”

“Do you want some wine?”

“Thanks but no.”

We chitchat for a while and listen to Mo pattering around in the kitchen, reheating food. He pokes his head into the room and asks if we want to watch recorded episodes of *Lost*. Tina glances at me.

“I've got to get home,” I say. We know there is no special reason why.

We say goodbyes and I drive home and change into my inpatient clothes and look out the window over the city. Under the purple swelling of clouds it's eerie, doom-filled. I do my nighttime rituals and before I can sleep, a memory surges.

We're at a ball game in the summer. I'm twenty-two. Alex is thin, clean-shaven, twenty-seven. We're new to each other. It has been a promising affair. It feels, to me, like being carried down a cool river toward the sea.

But this day is all wrong. He's moody, distant.

I buy beers and hot dogs and ask him repeatedly, is he okay? Does he want to leave? Does he want anything? It's too strange. I need a clue. By the seventh inning stretch he has stopped responding to me at all.

After the game he breaks up with me in the car.

"It's not a good idea for either of us," he says. "It's been a while, but not enough of a while. I'll be straight with you. I am not sure I want to be alive."

I dumbly nod. It's like seeing a tree fall. Every other night this week he was very much a fan of being alive, but it's clear he isn't bluffing now. His eyes lightly pulse.

He pulls a picture of Ana from his wallet, as if to provide proof that his mess is actual and no generic fear of intimacy. In the photograph she is dark-haired and pleasant-looking, like someone who'd work at a fitness center or a bank. Not pretty enough to be a ghost.

I decide she is manageable competition.

"I believe you," I say, and take a big breath. "Work this out however you can. I'll help you, I can help. I'm not afraid of it." Saying some things makes them so.

"I need some room to think," he says.

"It's never going to be easy."

"I'm not approaching it with that expectation. I lack the words to describe this particular brand of unease." He takes my hand. "You deserve a life that is great," he says, and kisses my fingertips.

"Should you be alone?"

At this he shakes his head.

"Not alone," he says. "I have people."

He has people. He has people in a way I do not. The sadness is generally buried; he's a fun guy. He has people, old people, young people, most days of the week someone drops by. He has people he works for who don't press him about his stammering career because of his talent and personality and also, yes, the circumstances. He has a dozen

women across the spectrum of friends and lovers who want to heal him.

We don't go out again in town. Sometimes I see him in the mornings walking to the cafe he likes. I usually honk, he usually smiles broadly and falsely, as if we're old pals. Two months later he's magnificently sleeping around and I take a public relations job in Washington. My last stop before the highway is to drive by to drop my copy of his house key in the mailbox.

I find out later that Ana disappeared in the summer, late August. He says the particular heat and scent of that time of year haunts him in a way he can't shake.

Spring thaw. All is restless.

I start taking the train out to different cities along the coast on the weekends, thinking about places to look for work. I travel to Providence, Baltimore, Savannah. Up and back, down and back, rarely overnight. I associate hotels with a desperate feeling, the feeling of hiding or having been stranded. Trains at night are nicer, the hum of metal on metal, shadows rushing between the trees.

A new career. I help Tina market fancy products, things like bath salts and high-end tile. My work has gotten to feeling circular, contained.

I could be a police officer, maybe. A cab driver. A gardener. A small-time actor – not movies, but plays. My education history is weak, which has kept my resume stocked with mistruths and me holding carefully to a job that pays just fine but that I don't love. In my well-heeled neighborhood I'm a squatter, a tourist. Two weeks before graduation, I turned eighteen and left high school without the diploma. My parents were lost in their own woods, then. Liam was in college, on scholarship, doing just fine, making everyone

proud. They didn't terribly mind having a shadow child and a sun child. I was fine with what I'd done. I never liked the ritual aspects of proving knowledge or understanding; it damaged tender roots of interest that depended on continuous questioning to take. I moved upstate to a college town, found a cheap place to live and work answering phones, and glanced around until I set my sights on a lovely, troubled man with a PhD. To an outsider, it would have looked like luck.

On these little trips I am alone, but moving. It's less melancholy than visiting with friends about *how things are going*. Everyone always wants to talk about men, even, I admit, me, even if I can feel color draining from my world while it happens.

Sometimes in an eastern city I'll catch the date on a statue or building and it reminds me how little I know of history, people and places. When I came to Washington, I'd never known this strip of country. Those peeling buildings with wainscoting, coffered ceilings, lacquered doors, thick brass doorknobs. Old things. I'd scarcely been around old, ornate things. In Colorado, buildings state their purposes in plain-speak. Even the churches are unfussy.

Hurtling along the coast in train cars, the physical feats of others come to mind and seem to matter. They beckon and taunt from unseen places across the country, across oceans, across time. Skyscrapers, bridges, telephone lines. All the jagged places where men hack the earth for nickel, salt, and clay.

I read books, or I don't. I watch people, or I don't.

When I arrive in Charleston and see palm trees lining the streets of downtown, it occurs to me that I'd long ago made an assumption that palm trees came from Hollywood. I make mental note to locate and dislodge logical flaws like these that have nested in

mind and quietly flourished.

I start interning nights at a local radio station. I don't tell Tina until they offer me steady work in production, with the possibility of airtime if something opens up.

Ephemerality is the draw – things said on air burst, ripple, and disappear.

Liam calls with news.

“I'm getting married,” he says. “to Janie.”

I lightly recoil for some reason and breathe deep. I don't know Janie, and I can't quite remember her being mentioned. People you've never met all reside in the same gray casserole.

“Congratulations,” I say, and peer suspiciously at the phone. “Come on, tell me about her.”

Liam has been living in Alaska since college, studying fish. Neither of us much enjoys going back home, a fact that has silently bonded us through the years.

“She's a firecracker,” he says. “We fight a lot, but I guess it's pretty fun. The fighting always leads to some greater understanding. She looks a little like you, Ellen.” He's quiet, thinking. “Somehow that was meant as a compliment to you. I meant nothing weird by it.”

There is something between brothers and sisters that no one mentions. It has nothing direct to do with sexuality; it's a friendship thing. These loves shape our other loves.

“I'm thrilled for you,” I say, and relax. “Where's the wedding? When?”

“We don't know, and we don't know, but soon. Here's the other part – we're having

a baby in the fall.”

I grin. I picture a small person with Liam's curiosity, his awkwardness, his particular style of daring. Traits I'd all but forgotten since we'd established our lives on different ends of a vast country.

“Yes!” I say. “Aunthood, ahoy.”

“Yes!” he says. When we were young, sometimes, we'd be walking up to the corner store or the subdivision pool, and one of us would take the other's hand, lift it up and shout, *Yes! Ja! Oui! Si, si!*

We stay quiet on the phone a moment more while I absorb this new thing and then I get to laughing and congratulating him again.

“Keep the details coming,” I say.

“I surely will,” he says. “I'm sure this goes without saying, but I really want this child to know you, to know who you are.”

“I will do my best,” I say, thinking, *and have the kid break it down nice and simple for me.*

I've never been married, a detail that is starting to distinguish me from other people my age. Like most single women in town at times I've imagined some form of wedding, mouthed the vows, and like most I could find someone to propose marriage to me if that was my big interest. My thoughts on this idea of marrying have been defined through negatives, arranged from the information leaking through holes in the institution's supposed armor.

The game is rigged, if you want to know. I fell in love with a man whose wife is a

ghost, and I gave it a mighty effort. Love, as the evolutionary psychologists or Carl Sagan might say, is a matching of hope and circumstance with physical chemistry; a coincidence of lifestyles and desires. I've turned down come-ons from many a married man and consoled many a divorcee at her nadir. I've watched people enter into the sanctity of marriage knowing the ensuing years would be harder than they would be fun, that the bottom would fall out from under them, and that there were massive, tentacled things they were actively hiding from each other. One year, amid the usual holiday postcards, I received a photograph of Leigh, my favorite aunt, and her kids posing in the snow with a puppy and a jagged hole where Uncle Phil should have gone. My own parents, after dealing with Dad's alcoholism and Mom's crappy upbringing, discovered that what they most loved about each other were traits embedded within the big demons – Dad's silliness, Mom's passivity. The puzzle stopped fitting with those parts missing. Everyone has stories like these. Everyone knows fifty stories just like these.

My father claims it's coded in the eyes whether a person has ever been a user of serious drugs. He says intoxication of a certain level never quite leaves the body; the memory of the experience is inscribed too far within.

A person who casts reliable futures off for the elusive, twisted bliss we call love, the poet's love, would only have done so under such a gut-thirsty influence, for the odds are stacked and mortared against the move turning out in her favor.

We support wise combinations over intoxicated pairings. We're beat if we want passion.

The average, sweet, unhindered couples tell me nothing. They live non-stories, in a sense, non-loves. They raise children and eat vegan cheese, or they don't. They argue

about directions and take scuba-diving vacations, or they don't. They are not the embodiment of what stirs my center. If they were, something about their eyes would be on fire, always, if only at an angle.

At the station, I'm offered a slot between two and three-thirty a.m. Our frequency doesn't come in clear from a distance or in difficult weather. My coach is Gerry, a gray-haired Chinese-American who has been with WLAC for decades, has a faded Southern drawl and smells lightly of chemicals. He works with me on my pacing and elocution, tells me to say my name on-air as if "I've got a fleet of smiling cherubs at my service." *Ellen Inman*. After a couple of weeks it sounds to me like any other radio person's name: a sort of shorthand for an entire way of living.

It's all songs and quick news items at the beginning, but Gerry urges me to experiment, says this shift is like a free pass.

On days off, I visit the library to poke through a few science journals, theoretical physics, evolutionary psychology. It's bewildering to me how many topics there are out there that people study. I write down questions and thoughts, but mostly just wing it on air, collecting loose, strange facts from the tightly woven technical language in the journals.

We tell each other bad jokes, too.

"Three statisticians are hunting for quail," he says one night. "The first shoots ten feet to the right of the bird. The second shoots off ten feet to the left. The third says 'looks like we got him!' and packs up the truck."

I laugh at this unguardedly, understanding that what's surprising and delightful is

not the quality of the joke, but the fact that he's working to get me to smile.

Rarely does anyone call in to my show and rarely can I find an intelligent guest willing to banter with a novice in the dead of night. But I learn to take some pride in this fact. The loneliest hour of all is the one I'm given to watch over. Most things happening at this time are strange things. I picture my audience as a bleary-eyed and pasty lot, driving home from hospitals, police stations, newsrooms. Delivery drivers, night stocking crews, sleepless new arrivals from points east.

The sun is on its way up, unmoving cars packed end to end on the other side of the highway when I drive back to my apartment. I draw the blinds and sleep. While I make coffee and toast, business people are down there striding home, shedding the coarse attitudes of the day. They are softening, preparing, shifting into parents or lovers or whatever they happen to become in their hours off.

Liam and Janie hold their wedding at the high point of the summer by Clean Hand Lake, which is fed by two sloshing rivers. I'd never been to Alaska before and this time of year is magically lit, the daylight staying on nearly until midnight, the peak of twilight stretching out for a full hour. It's a smallish affair; the airfare and lodging are expensive, but it's clear that the couple have a strong community here. We stay in cabins at the edge of the lake, each member of my family in a different rental, and we pass each other on walks in between the festivities. My father and mother are both starting to seem significantly old. Dad's blond hair has turned to mostly white with yellow edges, Mom's teeth are surrounded by darkish lines. Of the four of us, only Liam looks young. His step is lively. His eyes are fierce. When I mention this to him, he laughs politely and says he's

only like this in the summer.

Janie is a glowing beauty, a wise, fit woman with a protruding belly. She takes a walk with me on the morning of the ceremony and she points out which birds are which birds and what they eat. She probably knows as much about birds as Liam knows about fish. I tell her that I don't know anything about nature; that until a few months prior I'd believed that palm trees came from Hollywood. She laughs in the same polite way Liam laughs and says "That's ridiculous, but I think I get it. I know as much about city driving as a palm tree does."

After the ceremony everyone has a glass of champagne, even the bride and even my father, and we roast some food over a firepit – a fire whose light and heat seem strange in the manic brightness of the place. Liam introduces me to some male friends from the university, and I make an effort to flirt with them, if only for his sake.

I watch how my parents interact. They are a little dry with each other and communicate mostly about logistics, impolite but deeply kind, fussing over the preparation of the food and making sure people all have napkins and seats. There is no more openness left in Mom, she has lost interest in social nuance. There are no more eyebrow-wiggling one-liners from Dad, no double entendres that used to make her blush. Those old patterns are here but faint and inverted, as if the former ways of relating have been sent through a dusty, mirrored chamber. Dad catches my eye and takes my hand. While someone plays country melodies on a perfectly tuned guitar, we walk to the edge of the water.

He bends down to twist up his pant legs. His movements are jerky and slow, a bit clumsier than I remember. He appears resigned to a certain inner woe, a thing that at half

his age I fear I nearly understand. I'm aware of a rising sensation of something like nausea, it must be a bit of what children of suicides feel when they get that faint whiff of copper just before peeking into the study. Something at my core is on the move.

Janie had said there was rain in the week before. The lake is at the center of a shallow valley, so the rivers move and churn a little on both sides before the water pools out. Cicadas buzz in the trees. We take our shoes off and step into the lake, not talking much but when we do, saying things like *beautiful ceremony* and *gee, they really have the life out here*.

Surrounded by beauty, I'm stirred by records of the deeply physical. Nature's aphrodisiac properties always get to me. In some ways, these are the memories with Alex that are nearest to my center, the toughest ones to reach and ever tougher to reframe. The time we camped in a truck bed beneath a meteor shower on a Rocky Mountain on the first day of fall, the provisions we packed spoiling because we couldn't be troubled to gnaw on something so banal as food. Or the time we hiked through woods in Virginia and the sky tore open and dumped a mess of weather down on our heads. We hollered at the sky and made love against a tree, not bothering with precautions, but doing what we felt and briefly praying that lightning did not hit our particular tree. We hoped then, low in our bodies, that something would change; that the seed would take and we'd have a reason beyond feeling to merge our lives. Remembering those times feels nothing like those times felt when they were freshly lived.

Everything your heart is in is a kind of marriage. Those infinite one-off copies are embedded somewhere in the word itself. It's a wonder anyone proceeds at all when the biggest things mean so many furiously different things.

Our trance is broken when two young women from the wedding, cousins of the bride, run in our direction with a bottle of bubbly. They tear off their cheap cotton dresses and leave them to the shore, and go on into the water in pretty underwear, trading precious sips of something they're not quite old enough to buy.

“But it's so cold,” my dad remarks self-consciously, unrolling his pant legs and reaching for his shoes. He touches my shoulder and walks back to the group.

Rooted in the rocky sand, I stay and watch more beautiful swimmers enter the lake. They are splashing and teasing each other, getting tipsy. Some pairs move away from the larger group and begin to kiss. Night pauses in the periphery before it falls. The party swells up and spreads out through the water. In the diffuse white light of the moon, they look to me like some species of slender, elegant dinosaur, their assured movements casting only faint shadows that ripple so briefly and then go still.

New Weather

Dear God,

Is it too early to discuss the end of days?

This morning I took a bus into the city, as I usually do. When I got on, outside the city, the bus was already full of people, and they were packed in tight. It was raining out, hot and rainy, and most of the windows were fogged. Each time the bus lurched to a stop, standing passengers would lean and stumble and swap apologies. Some would try to get on and others would try to get off. For anyone to get on or off, the dense configuration of people would have to change, expand and contract within the hard limits of the bus.

We approached a stop full of people wanting to get on. The driver – a man in middle age – shook his head angrily as he pulled the lever to open the door. He growled that ONE PASSENGER! was allowed to join us. The people at the stop couldn't decide who the passenger should be, and so the bus driver pulled the lever to close the door and we hurtled toward the next stop. It was also full of people, so he passed them by without opening the door. There were passengers on the bus who wanted to get off at the stop, but because the doors didn't open, the passengers couldn't leave. They called out to the bus driver to be let off. The driver cried back to them that he did not permit mayhem on his bus. LET US OFF, the people cried. LET ME DRIVE, the driver cried.

The bus driver kept driving toward the city, passing stops crowded with hopeful passengers, and I watched their faces transition from relieved to disdainful to angry as he drove by. Some passengers called the police. The bus driver kept driving, driving out past

the park at the edge of the city, past the miniature golf course and the strip malls just beyond it, and up to a desolate parking lot in an impoverished suburb. He let us off the bus then. Taxis and police cars followed us into the lot.

The bus driver did not get off the bus. A pair of policemen approached, stepping tentatively onto the bus, addressing the driver. SIR, they said. SIR, you need to talk to us, SIR. SIR, turn around. Turn around, motherfucker, who do you think you are?

I didn't wait to see what happened. I took a taxi home.

The news reported later that the bus driver died there in the parking lot, he'd driven buses for the city twelve years and counting, a devoted husband and father of four. Something simple: his heart stopped.

I don't know what to make of all this, but God, it seems so strange to me that it has to be significant. Something is wrong. Something here is terribly wrong. Is the wrongness new? Am I crazy?

Yours,

Eileen

Dear Eileen,

What you're experiencing is a natural aversion to unpleasant surprises and the difficulties associated with mass transit. To answer your questions in order:

It is never too early to discuss the end of days – it is a deep and lovely subject; you may bring it up at any time. But to discuss the end, consider, child, that you are also implicitly discussing the beginning and the middle of days, which days must have if they have ends. Think of this: when you say to a friend, "Have a good day!" you are then

discussing the end of days, in a sense. Ends are not, by their very nature, sad; ends are effects of beginnings! If ends are sad, so must beginnings also be. What I am getting at here is that what seem to you to be surprises are merely fulfillments of form.

Secondly: No, Eileen. The wrongness isn't new. Think of what I said about days. Ends are beginnings. What's new is old. You'll see.

You asked me, is it over? "Overness" is relative to something in this case. It may be near to being over in some sense, and in some other sense, it is not. It is also relative, by the way, as is is. You can see a pattern emerging, I hope.

You aren't, objectively, crazy. You may feel crazy, or you may not. The word itself is a problem for you, because it means something different for you than it seems to mean to other people. You don't mind the idea of being crazy, exactly. You can inhabit craziness and find value in it. What you mind is missing out on other things while you are inhabiting it. Well, here's some news for you: the world you live in works that way. When you are one place, you are not in another place. When you are one person, in your case, yourself, you are not another person, at least, not in the same sense in which you are you. Don't call it "crazy" when you feel askew – call it something else, if it helps you. Use whatever words you like best. Call it "gone fishin.'"

With love,

God

P.S. Mass transit. Think on that a spell. How could it not end in death once in a while? And why shouldn't it happen in close proximity to you?

Dear God,

I'm starting to get what you mean about ends and beginnings, though it's hard to keep the notion active in mind for long. Their order seems to matter, doesn't it? Can't one beginning contain several potential endings? Otherwise, there would be no free will at all, would there? And where, Almighty, does physics play a role?

I do like your sense of humor.

Since my last letter, I've been riding the buses daily almost with no significant traumas. But this morning, I looked up from my book to glance around at the other passengers. Many were reading or holding books themselves and I noticed a pattern so I wrote down the titles. "Imminent Darkness," "The End Beckons," "This Ruined Planet," "But the Sky Is Actually Falling," and so forth.

While I gratefully take your point (I think) about ends and beginnings, which seems largely to be about reconciling fear, still, there is something about being alive on this planet now that frightens me. Evidence of planetary devastation is piling up around me, in the oceans and waterways, in the dumps, in the rusting urban centers, in the air. Sometimes I can see the fragments of decline hovering in the atmosphere above cities, blurring out the stars at night and the tops of buildings in daytime. I'm not that old, God, in the grand scheme of things, and even I can see the changes that have amassed in my short lifetime. If I really try, I can feel the dust of civilizations landing in my lungs.

I live in a nice town with nice people and I've found a viable niche in a line of work that fulfills me. I eat plenty of citrus and listen to hopeful music while I exercise. Trying to imagine the devastation piling up elsewhere – I mean, where people are beset by illness and mass violence, where it's really bad – results in just an awful feeling: a

blackening in the brain; a sinister, irreconcilable bruise in my consciousness.

Contemplating the bruise seems only to make it bigger and more painful, and yet I can't ignore it.

Was this all building to a question? I can't remember, God, I'm sorry. Here, I'll try. What I'm getting at is that my life is pretty good, in all the common measures used for lives, and even I am feeling the advent of eternal devastation. It is afoot, it must be. When will it happen? How will it go? How must all the others feel? Are you at liberty to say?

Thank you,

Eileen

Dear Eileen,

Pleased to hear from you again. Have you ever read The Divine Comedy? Give it a whirl. Check out the Bible, too, if you like. Fear of devastation, physical and otherwise, is neither new nor worse this year than last, but that doesn't make it any less frightening, I know. I'll lob some questions back before answering yours: why is it important to you to know how and when planetary devastation will occur? Why would knowing calm your fears? Would knowing not result in a blitzkrieg, if you will, of follow-up questions that would further embolden the blackening bruise across your brain?

With love, and a grain of salt,

God

Dear God,

Hmm. Okay.

It isn't important to me, I guess. Knowing whether atomic warfare or plague or celestial collision or alien interference or some unholy combination thereof will be the end of us would just set me spinning on the tertiary details. You're pushing me, in a sense, toward a place of acceptance.

Relativity, fear, hope, the end of days – this is all starting to seem a lot simpler in a way.

I suspect this bruise situation has to do with free will in some way. If I accept the end of days as being fated in the existence of the days themselves, and thus not tragic, but neutral, what argument is there for one to put effort into the motions of living? I am asking about suicide, you see, though perhaps suicides of the most passive nature. I can't imagine doing active violence to myself - I own a cat! I am talking about the act of letting oneself die, in fulfillment with the design of one's form – letting the very flaws and holes and irritations in one's physical self overtake the soul's interest in continuing on.

I hope you won't take offense to this. My life is a gift from your provenance, and I do intend to care for it, but my motivation to do so may require refreshment and reframing from time to time.

Yours,

Eileen

Dear Eileen,

I do relish our conversations.

Free will. Ah, free will. Free will. Say the words, hold them on your tongue. Free will.

Think of all we've discussed so far. Think of relativity. Think of this word free as embodying infinite notions. Free! Free! Free! It's an idea that occurs in languages all across your planet.

Imagine these two words, "free" and "will," as two stars in the sky, evident though intangible. Imagine that I gave everybody on your planet a little machine for documenting the two stars based on their particular points of view. Now imagine that each documented version of those stars were to be collated with the others and copied and redistributed, and each possible pairing of the versions of "free" and "will" there were to be collected and interpreted by all of the bodies, and that all of the interpretations would then be interpreted by all of the bodies, too. Would that task seem infinite to you? Now think how much more capturable are the stars than the two ideas, free and will.

It helps to think of them as units, these words, but they are not. They are an infinitude of lines drawn in an infinitude of sands, and yet, they contain knowable cores, don't they? Well, here we go: the cores in the words – their meanings – are made of the same material from which you yourself spring. The core in the words, dear child, is you. The core in you is me. You didn't invent the mechanisms through which words operate, but each time you consider them and come to know them a little better, each time you use them to inquire or convey, you nourish them, you bring them up, and in turn they nourish you. Doesn't that make you feel great – in the sense that gods are great?

See how this works? See how you, young Eileen, are also a word?

We are made of the same things. Think about that vis-à-vis your previous question about physics. Let's talk again soon.

With love,

God

Dear God,

Thanks for this. I will put that notion of sameness into play along with all the rest. It is more than a little unsettling to think of myself as a merely a word, although, it is also unsettling to think of myself as a person, to be honest.

Is it repetitive for me to tell you inane stories about my life? If you can see all and know all, and if I am but a fulfillment of a kind of form, these details can't be of great significance to you, can they?

I took a trip recently to another city. On the course of the trip, I took buses, trains, planes, shuttles, and taxis.

Along the way I met several men, all older than me by at least ten years. In each instance, they initiated the conversation. I felt like one of those fluorescent lights that attracts bugs to it. I don't recall any of their names, just their odd faces and what they all talked to me about: theories of work.

I didn't learn anything interesting about the nature of work, but the pattern itself was interesting. They talked and talked, all but praising themselves and the high positions they'd obtained, outlining for me their distinct recipes for success. "Invest mightily in your wardrobe," one said. "Tell, don't ask," another said. "Disprove your loyalty whenever possible," another said, winking, "this works in intimate relationships, too."

What about me encouraged their chatting, brought out these kinds of directives from pompous men? Do I appear to need a leg up? Do I seem under-confident? Is this a

new form of flirting? That patterning is a kind of weather, wouldn't you say? When similar things happen all close together like that, isn't it a kind of wrinkle in the sky? Like the books on the bus?

What could it mean, God? Does it mean something or nothing?

Especially confused this time,

Eileen

Dear Eileen,

Remember the bus driver? Significance abounds, or it's nowhere. There are always vantages from which common events appear significant, just as there are vantages from which significant events seem common. Significance could just be seen as a scalar interruption of sorts, or perhaps an egocentric insistence on the significance of your own vantage (whatever is happening near you at the time).

With love,

God

Dear God,

Hi again. It has been awhile - that's an understatement! Life has changed for me! I'm married now, to Oscar, which you know. We have a child, you know that also, Mara is two, and I have begun to see how offspring alter the scale of things in one's perception. I no longer feel I need to be alive forever, or that Oscar does. We are a part of a continuance, and that's a lot! I'm starting to see that it takes more work to continue things than to end them, whatever the things may be. Our daughter is a word to me in the

sense we once discussed. She is an avenue for my darkest inquiries and deepest intentions. She is as giant as a god to me and as tiny as a word ... an infinite line in infinite sands.

Throughout the years, I've wondered how these conversations work. Do you answer us all? Do you prioritize the sincere? Do you make distinctions? What is the worth of one person's sadness, to you? Why would you be compelled to prioritize my interests over another's? What is the value of asking?

Sincerely,

Eileen

Dear Eileen,

The value of an answer naturally increases in proportion to the complexity and rarity of the question. You, Eileen, are also a question, and the values present in your questions are my answers.

Love,

God

Dear God,

I think back sometimes to my younger self, that timid girl seeing cracked skies everywhere she looked. I don't think my life is going to end in some rotten way, and even if it did, it wouldn't have been without its own sort of beauty. I watch our daughter grow to be tall and gentle, and Oscar and I get on so well. We eat good food, we drink nice wine, we take long walks together on the weekends to appreciate nature.

The longer my life proceeds unscathed by destruction, the more confidence I have that it will remain unscathed, and this draws me out into the pain of other people in other communities. I'm especially compelled by times and places in the world wherein violence was the order. In my lifetime, there has been no true war, not anywhere near me physically, though I'm told we are under its constant threat.

Some days, I get lost in war records. I read letters between soldiers and loved ones, copies of orders, military documents, maps, weapons designs, news stories, diaries from in and near and after the fights. At the library, I sift through images of just the most horrific things. I wonder if my interest in such horrors is indicative of a hopeful nature – in that I will find some avenue for better outcomes, or at least, some empathy for the oppressed – or if it indicates a streak of darkness that lives inside me. I now see the planet as a brain, and war its blackening bruise.

If violence is a kind of weather, it is catastrophic. It's analogous to hurricanes, tornadoes, floods. As rough as this weather may be I do believe violence is rarer than peace, though this assessment must grow from the bias of my own peaceful experiences. And yet devastation lasts longer, reaches further, than nourishment in some sense. Am I wrong about this? Why would this be?

Yours,

Eileen

Dear God,

I have missed our correspondence ... the pleasure of humility, the feeling of looking up. Where have you gone?

Eileen

Dear God,

Have your feelings toward me neutralized? Are you now quite busy?

I am trying to get through a most difficult time. Perhaps you're aware. My husband has fallen ill, an advanced form of cancer, a disease brought on by the sun. The sun. Giver of life, nourisher of crops, enhancer of vacations.

It's devastating to me. He's not doing well, God. Mara is handling it, she's very thoughtful and brave about the whole thing. But I can feel my own interior hardening, my soul freezing up. I so fear loneliness. Can you assure me I will get through this? Can you give the comfort I need?

Thanking you in advance,

Eileen

Dear God,

I suppose I have not been as consistent as you would have liked. For that, I am sorry.

Eileen

Dear God,

I miss him, now, and I desperately need a kind word from you.

Will you forsake me?

How did we grow so far apart?

-Eileen

Dear Eileen,

I made in you a magnificent paradox, the paradox of love and fear, of strength and fragility, of all opposing forces one can name.

The parts of yourself you cannot see are what I see. Look back on our correspondence: how do we differ? Is the difference real?

Reaching answers from the inside is the hardest thing to do.

You can see a pattern emerging, I hope.

With love,

God

P.S. Who do you think built the sun?

Sea War

In the days before the teacher's death, I sensed the arrival of something new and foul, as one can sometimes detect ominous pressure changes in the air. An ethereal threat had gathered. I first mistook it for a change in the weather - an early, nasty winter. I believe now that what did happen was terrible, early and nasty too if you could perfectly see what it was. As someone that it happened to, I can also say it was painless.

She had worked in our great gray school for decades. A portrait of her hung on the wall in the hallway near the faculty lounge, the photo paper grainy and aged but the face young and smooth. During the weeks after her death, when she appeared in my mind, it was not the she I had actually known but the image in that photograph, the frozen she of her prime.

She taught reading. As an educator, her brilliance went unrecognized in the faculty awards ceremonies, but I am certain we all shrank humbly before it. She never said one word aloud to me, or to anyone, not even her students. She spoke with her body, the eyes, the posture, and you had to pay attention. The effect this had on people was to disarm them. It forced their egos to retreat.

And she was gone.

The interviewing process for a replacement teacher was cloaked in mystery. We saw no candidates come or go. Gossip held that the dead teacher had not been a trained professional, but rather was the kind of anomaly that effortlessly rises into position, as if by divine right. "They won't find another one of her," the math teacher said. "She was a transcendent irrational, like *pi*."

All of us at the school were having a hard time figuring out what to do with the students. We had shared them; they rotated among the classrooms during the school day. We first made the assumption that the depression of the kids would fade naturally over time. Someone typed up a pretty good pamphlet about youth and grief and mailed it out to students' families. Extra guidance counselors drove in from other districts and tended to the students when they became overwhelmed. But the kids grew sullen, and the sullenness was spread out among them, as a bad odor in the earth sticks to each particle of soil. We emphasized to the kids that life continued on for all of us who were living with a few minor differences.

I taught social studies, the history of civilizations. After the teacher's death, my students were not impressed by the advent of democracy or the significance of various rivers. Pyramids and cave paintings held no mystique and the parabolic paths of explorers among the continents widened no eyes. The glummer they became, the more urgently I spoke, which had the effect, possibly, of pushing them further from reach.

One morning I scrapped my lessons to address what might have been the root of their woe. Emphatically, I wrote "Loss of life" on the chalkboard, the hard talc screaming across the slate. They looked up.

"Passing away. Departing. Kicking the bucket. Buying the farm. It happens everywhere," I said, "in every culture, to everyone. Loss of life is common to us all, a massive organizing principle all civilizations share."

I saw a pair of sweet young eyes blinking in the corner and a tentative hand rising up.

"Yes?"

“Are you saying that death can be good?”

It can. Yes.

“No, not exactly. I’m saying it provides a kind of order that unites people, whatever their beliefs are. It is a reality shared by all humans, and all cultures deal with it differently.”

“Are there ways to get them back?” another student asked.

“Them?”

“The dead.”

“Not quite, not recognizably. That’s what makes death unique: no matter which way you look at it, it is a physical endpoint, a hard stop. But life doesn’t stop for the living, and some cultures see death as a reminder to celebrate all who are still here.”

Talking about it calmed me, and the class grew more alert, more responsive. I told them that in Mexico the dead were celebrated each autumn with colorful sugar skulls and a great communal feast where people went from door to door, filling their bellies. I told them that in Indian religions, death was not the true end for the individual, but a transition point in a cycle of reincarnation, like the trough point of a wave, and that in ancient Egypt, the dead had been buried with all their most precious things, masks and fabrics and diadems, so they could have access to them in the next world.

“How do you know about that?” one student asked, grimly.

“I’ve seen evidence,” I said.

“What kind of evidence?”

“Pictures of their tombs,” I said, “Reports from all over the world. The information is easy to access, you can see for yourself in the geographic magazines in the

library. Go take a look after school.”

“I have practice after school,” the student said. His eyes betrayed a bright enchantment.

“Another time, then,” I said.

“If their things are buried in this world, how are they using them in the next world?” another student asked. “Is the next world underground?”

“Not necessarily,” I said. “It’s a belief system. People disagree on the details of what happens to the body, and to the spirit. There are many different theories about where the next world is.”

“Where do you think it is?” the student asked.

“Where do *I* think it is?” The question caught me seriously off guard, and although I knew it best not to answer direct appeals to personal beliefs in the classroom, I, too, wanted to know where I thought the next world was.

I stalled a moment, pretending to look over some notes at my podium, and it suddenly bothered me that I did *not know what I thought*. And it was death, not cycling or baking – it was death I didn’t know how I felt about, the ends to things, or their changed continuation, or however it actually went. I cared about this topic deeply and had thought about it before, done plenty of reading on the matter, and yet no, I did not now know what I thought happened to a thing after its end. A word came to mind, and an image. The image was shards of continents shaking loose from the larger landmasses. The word was “adrift.”

“It could be anywhere,” I said, holding the edges of the podium tightly, as if to steady a ship.

“Why are there dead people in magazines?” another student asked, looking down at her shoes.

“Because death is important,” I said, “and when something is important, people must look deeper into it and discuss it with each other. And since we can’t talk directly to the people in ancient communities, or in villages across the globe, that conversation plays out across the pages of magazines. Books, too.”

“Why is death important?” she followed up, frowning in a way that struck me as pretty mature.

“Because life is important.”

I repeated the discussion with all my classes that day. The topic did get easier. When I got home after school, I thought over the conversations and could see that the scope of their lives had changed, or was changing right before my eyes. Limits were now visible, things no longer just had beginnings.

I didn’t want to enthuse them too much about it, but of course, there were magnificent processes that began with death. The way that bodies nourish the soil, or provide clues to future bodies about their ways of living; the way that arrangements of bones fill museum corridors and spark inquiries in the minds of passersby. Perhaps the most intense engagements of human memory were triggered by death, or by the possibility of it. The fact of animals dying shone before us in so many of our dinners. Death had given us Halloween, Easter, Independence Day. Countless saints, stories, songs. It was, in fact, productive, if not directly so for the dead.

I began working on a series of lessons that emphasized the value of negativity

within all sorts of processes: natural, mechanical, psychological. After several hours of sitting at my desk, I noticed that my shoulders ached; I was holding them up around my neck as if I'd been directed to maintain a theatrical pose. It was time for some air.

My town wasn't much for nightlife, but the bar and grill down the main road often had live music playing near the week's end. I found a seat at the bar, ordered a cocktail and tried to relax under the colored lights, listening to the performers' duet about how nothing in life was ordinary. I stirred my drink with its thin red straw, swaying a little.

Everything in life was ordinary, wasn't it, once you thought about how many of us there were? Even the most spectacular events of my life had occurred thousands of times over, all over the planet, to others. Anything I'd read about masks and diadems and sugar skulls had been printed off thousands of times and read by thousands of others; forgotten by thousands too.

"Originality is impossible," a voice said. A man had sat beside me, a young, handsome man, with loose, light clothing and a jaunty hat, which he removed.

Had I spoken aloud?

"No," I said, gathering myself, "not innately."

"But it is for you."

He lifted a hand to shake mine, and he gave no name. His eyes zigged and zagged over the setting, taking stock of the liquors and liqueurs, the light fixtures and the people around us. My eyes traveled behind his. The duet was getting to the song's bridge; noise swelled. He gestured for me to lean in.

"It's snowing in Venice," he said. A smile stretched easily across his face, as easily as a smear of butter melting into hot bread.

“Come again?” I asked, and he gave me a look indicating that he knew I heard him the first time.

“Nevermind you, nevermind me, nevermind here. It’s snowing in Venice,” he said. “Think of that.” He had such a strangely positive tone! Something about his presence managed to gum up my mental faculties, and I forgot, for a moment, where Venice was. Snowing somewhere far away, though, I liked that. When the heart was hollow, as mine felt now, coldness could be a kind of comfort. Picturing fluttering white flakes descending from the sky was a relief from wondering whether the next world was, in fact, underground.

“Oh,” I said. A boat is what my mind saw. Yes, Venice was that city of boats and wealth, a drenched beauty. It was rumored to be sinking, whatever that could mean. In my mind’s Venice, all the weary denizens paddled the canals in scarves and stripes. Venice must have funerals, but with special cemeteries – large cement structures with bodies inside, built high, oozing mineral traces.

“The next war is underwater,” he said confidently.

“I didn’t ask about war,” I said, feeling a new urge to be alone.

“It’s a sea war,” he said.

“I didn’t ask,” I said again.

“You were wondering,” he said.

“I was wondering about the next world,” I said.

“It’s a sea war,” he said, “and you were wondering.”

It was difficult, suddenly, to remember what I had been wondering. I was now engulfed in wondering about the man; his origins, his work, his intentions, what kind of

nosy behavior he indulged in when not inserting words into people's heads.

"I think *you* are making things up," I said. "Sea war."

"For all you know I invented the concept," he said, polishing the area around his mouth with a tissue. I noticed he did not have a drink.

"Not having a drink?"

"The teacher's death has been hard for you," he said. "You should think about taking a vacation."

Was this a man I knew? Had we spoken before? It did not seem possible, but there had been so many new guidance counselors at the school, people mingling after the funeral, district-wide faculty mixers, and so on. He did look familiar. He did look, actually, come to think of it, nice.

"Just a weekend getaway," he suggested gently. "There are great deals to be had in Maine this time of year, if you're willing to gamble on the weather."

"Aren't you an expert on places far and wide," I said.

"You'd benefit immensely," he said. "You are very tired."

It was true, I was tired. I pushed my glass away and closed my eyes, allowing my grip on my mind to release. It felt very good.

"You are so tired," he said, his voice soothing. "Trying to help the fate of so many children."

"The children," I quietly said.

"A vacation," he said. "Consider all the faraway places you could be."

A new feeling set in then, the feeling of being understood.

"I don't think I'll go to Maine, thank you, but I sure could use a spa treatment."

That's what I'd do for restoration – a massage, something deep, with all kinds of hot oils and stones.” Before I'd finished the sentence, he had placed a little card on the bar in front of me. It had been embossed with the name of a local massage school, offering discounted services from masseuses in training. *Exotica available*, it said, *featuring all kinds of hot oils and stones*.

“Wow,” I said.

“Ask for Carlos,” he said. “Carlos is the best.”

It did not surprise me to discover that the man from the bar and grill was the replacement for the dead teacher, although it cannot be said that I knew he was the replacement when I met him. We were all called to a quick meeting during lunch hour the next day. In the faculty lounge, there he stood, comfortable as all. He looked at everyone else in the room in the same manner he looked at me; as if he had known us all a long time and would not be astonished by anything we said or did.

“Help has arrived!” the assistant principal said, beaming uncontrollably. “We have hired a replacement for the dead teacher, whom we have desperately missed and shall never forget. I will turn the floor over to him, now.”

“Thank you,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “The teacher's death has been an ordeal for all of you,” he said. He nodded and we nodded with him. “But I'm here now. You can return to your pre-death curricula. Know that I am *very* good with difficult questions. When the children ask something you don't quite know how to answer, please direct them to me.”

The meeting was short. His little introduction was followed by a rush of the

teachers to his side, hurrying to meet and thank him. I heard him mention a couple different times how crucial it was to take our vacations, and where the various teachers might want to go.

He had a certain magnetism, always lively and at ease. Where the dead teacher had invited contemplation, the new teacher elicited answers. He was a soothing, sure-footed person, with a fast-moving brain. He hummed and whistled in the hallways, and sometimes he even took the liberty of doing a little spin move as he progressed down the corridors. He took to completing our thoughts and sentences, and he would sometimes add a juicy, unexpected flourish. When I stopped to think about it, I didn't like his habit of making presumptions, but they were so often right, or *seemed* right, or moved things along anyway, that the details of it all got to mattering less and less.

The dead teacher had taught reading. The new teacher taught something else, I couldn't figure out just what, but he kept the sign that she'd placed on the door that said "reading."

The grimness of the students was lessening now that we had a cheerful replacement. Like a current rerouting, the direction of their emotions switched course.

Sometimes in the halls, the new teacher and I walked together. During lunch hour one day we walked past the library. A student of mine was in there, a boy, bent over a periodical with yellow edges. The new teacher craned his neck to better see the boy, his eyes zigging and zagging. I opened the glass door to the room.

"Hi there," I said to the student.

He held up the magazine, opened to a picture of what looked like a canoe,

covered in algae, filled with gray, mushy, human-like forms, all of which faced in the same direction.

“Get a look at *this*,” he said proudly. He read the caption to us with brio. “Twenty sunken pre-Columbian corpses were found just to the east of the Florida shore, presumably heading west toward what is now America. The peat present in the ocean floor preserved their bodies and brains, and early analysis shows them to be of European ancestry.”

I shivered.

“Interesting,” I said, seeking other words.

“You said death is important,” the student said. “Why are *these* deaths important?”

Because they almost changed history, I thought but couldn’t say. Because they almost landed in a brave new world, but sank instead under the weight of the weather and the waves, in their strong little boat.

I felt a rich sadness bloom, then, and it couldn’t be disguised. I turned away from the student.

“Relax, relax,” the new teacher said to me, steadying my back with his warm hands. He whispered something into the student’s ear and guided me toward the lounge.

“Think of Paimpol,” he said. “That’s a port city in France. It’s nearly summer. In the summer that city is full of bright flags and gold light, falling on the water, glinting off the sailboat masts. You would love it there; look into it at once. And please, go visit Carlos.”

“I will,” I said.

The new teacher made sure that I did. He arranged for me to meet with Carlos that evening after school, and the next day he brought me a package of pictures and hotel brochures where I might want to stay in Paimpol if I were to visit, seafood restaurants where I might want to eat. Looking and dreaming of the place sufficed for me as a kind of vacation, a separation from what was. It was enough to cure my sadness at the time.

“How are you liking the new teacher?” I asked the students, as the school year drew nearer to a close.

“He’s cool!” one said, and others nodded.

“He’s pretty cool,” I agreed.

“And he’s funny,” another said.

“Yeah! Really funny,” someone else agreed.

“Funny how?” I asked.

They were quiet.

“Like he’s really smart,” someone said.

“Smart how?” I asked.

“Like he’s fast at coming up with stuff,” the same student replied, frowning. She ducked down then and pulled a pinwheel out of her knapsack. She blew on its curved paper to make it spin.

“Could you please put that away?” I said.

“Oh, this?” she asked, flicking the wheel and gazing at it.

I noticed that several students’ eyes were all looking in the same direction, past where I stood and toward the door, where there was a little peek-in window.

In the window someone had put up a picture, a stark black pen drawing of two ships attacking each other on a choppy sea.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Sea war,” a student said, nonchalantly.

“You should take some time away from all of this,” the girl with the pinwheel said, “you should take a vacation.”

“You’d feel much better about things,” another student offered.

“You are too young to be giving out life advice,” I said.

“We knew you’d respond that way,” another student said, nodding, and other students indicated their agreement.

“Oh dear,” I said. When I looked back at the peek-in window, the new teacher’s face was there, watching. He looked calm.

“We’re going to take a quiz,” I said.

“Ugh,” they said.

“Yes, ugh,” I said. “Take out a piece of paper, and please put away your toys.”

“What’s it on?” a student asked.

“Everything,” I said. And then, for a very long time, I stood there in front of the kids and said nothing.

They sat as if in a trance, waiting for me to speak. Eventually they deposited their blank quiz papers on my desk and filed out. I hardly noticed them leaving. It was as though, from some elsewhere perch, I was watching some other teacher there and urging her to move. I stood for hours with my pointer finger in the air. When I drove home, it was late at night.

I sat in silence in my townhouse, the blank papers spread out in front of me. I poured a cup of cold coffee from the morning pot, sat down, and held a ballpoint pen. The pen hung in the air over the blank papers as stiffly as the words had on my tongue.

The phone rang.

“Hello?” I said.

“Aloha!” said the voice on the other end of the line. Surprise, it was the new teacher, his voice clothed in the language of Hawai’i.

“Aloha,” I answered back, enormously relieved.

“Don’t worry so much,” he said. “You’re starting to go bananas.”

“Worry about what?” I said, a thread of suspicion dangling somewhere in mind.

“That’s the ticket,” he said. “Good night.”

“Good night,” I said. I sipped my coffee, reasserted my grip on the pen. It failed to move. My eyes closed.

I saw through the darkness of sleep an ocean of sunken things in a sea floor. My ocean was full of non-sequiturs: weapons, garbage, human bones, fancy dishes, old neon signs ... whale carcasses, surgical equipment, trophies, cars. I could make no sense of the items. I could see but not inspect them, and I could not knit the facts of their existence together into something that had meaning. What was the significance of lost things, of having a glimpse to them now? When, exactly, had they disappeared and from where?

The ocean dream flickered into a new episode. Hawai’i is what my mind saw. I’d once known specific things about Hawai’i, rich details. I’d read accounts of the land and the people, and the pictures had been so bright: hot earth spewing from volcano necks, reefs vivid with plants and fish, bobbing whale pods that stretched out beneath the

water's surface for miles.

I should take a vacation, I thought. I was thinking in the voice of the new teacher.

I woke and looked down, still holding the pen. *Pinwheel*, I wrote, squeezing it and forcing it to move. I drew a pinwheel beside it. *Ask for Carlos*, I wrote, and drew a massage table. *The next war is a sea war*, I wrote, and beside it I scratched out a small canoe wedged into the sea floor, filled with human forms coated in strange matter, all facing in the same direction.

