Gallery of Remembered Birds

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To exist wholly in another, seamless
mirrored…

…a hand

over the other's heart. How do you live
with this distance? I have you, she
thinks, or, I know you,

but she can never say, I am you.
--Nick Flynn, "Twinned"

We became one body. One soul. We moved in one way. It was very complimentary, every arm movement, every head movement…we became the part.
--Rudolf Nureyev on performing Swan Lake *with Margot Fonteyn*

I.

You told me once that you knew instantly I was the one for you. The perfect partner. But it wasn't the same for me. Don't you remember what a monster you were? You'd stop rehearsal to yell at the corps dancers for missing as step, as if you weren't sixteen years old just like the rest of us. You were so certain you'd leave us all behind. In the halls, I'd spot you reading Stanislavsky, An Actor Prepares*; I'd catch you practicing longing glances at propped up brooms.*

Do you remember the rumors that were going around about you? The other girls said you'd swallowed a maggot while it was still alive. They said you did it to make yourself throw up because you were worried you were getting too fat to dance. Well, I said to them, maybe she should be worried about the way she looks; the way she looks is not the way a ballerina should look—too wide in the hips, at least a B cup in the breasts. When the ballet mistress partnered us up for an exhibition of Swan Lake *I was certain it was a punishment.*

To prepare, she said to us, we would have to learn how to split ourselves into two halves. She pulled you to the front of the room. She pointed once at the top of your bun and a second time at the crotch of your leotard.

"These are your two selves," she said. She turned to me and gestured again at you. "Now," she said, "which do you choose?"

As if you could split a girl between her stomach and her soul.

"Neither," I said, and the girls behind me laughed. I wanted them to laugh. I wanted you to know we were not friends.

I rolled my eyes when the ballet mistress praised your vertical carriage or continuous line, when she announced that your fouettés *put Margot Fonteyn to shame, when she applauded at the gentle way you collapsed into my arms. I knew how angry you could be, so it was strange to see you hood your eyes, to become something both alluring and plain. Odette, that little symphony of shifts and shades. I was impressed, in spite of how frustrating I found you.*

And then that afternoon that you pressed up to pointe and buckled. Pulled your ankle to your chest and lay on the floor silent, other girls circling up behind you, thrilled to see their competition brought so low. I was brought up to believe the ballerina was a sacred object. This is not an uncommon belief, although not, perhaps, between ballerinas. The ballet mistress knelt next to you and pressed around your ankle. Nothing. No pain. She ran your hand around the muscle of your calf, the ligaments of your knees. She scratched at your hamstring with her nails and the muscle twitched easily.

You clenched your teeth, looked away. You were tough in a way that would take me years to understand. Your mother had something to do with this: she didn't accept mistakes easily. She was your first ballet teacher and she used to chase you around the studio with a can of spray paint, threatening to dye your hair orange if you missed a step. The first time I pictured this it was so absurd I had to laugh. Then, I imagined her open mouth, the sound of her feet against the floor.

Finally, the ballet mistress unlaced your shoe, turned up the foot of your tights. She pulled out the packed lamb's wool and blister pads and began pressing her thumbs against all of the small bones of your foot. She found the spot that made you flinch. Not a ligament at all, but a small planter's wart, barely visible beneath the skin.

I was the one that took you to the podiatrist's. I sat beside you in the patient room and watched the doctor hold your foot under a light. He said there was a cream that could heal you in a month but you said

no, you needed it out sooner, so he lifted up your foot and pricked you with a needle full of anesthetic. You didn't reach for my hand and I didn't offer it. We were children. We stared, transfixed, as the doctor cored the white, knotted tissue out of your skin. Then he left us alone, silent, in the room. You were dancing again the next afternoon.

I think that was the moment for me.

One

When the doctor announced that my mother's condition was not fatal, I felt a strange jerk in my lungs. It was like hitting the water chest first after a running dive. I'd been prepared for her death and all that it might entail: the cooking of the meals, the washing of the hair, even the dreaded changing of the diaper. All morning, sitting in the pale exam room, I'd held her hand in mine and rehearsed the role of doting daughter. I'd stroked her arm, practicing comfort. Her entire wrist fit easily between my forefinger and thumb; my mother had lost forty pounds in the last year. Whatever was killing her, we thought, it was killing her fast. We were both imagining cancer, various tumors, viruses that hollow out the body from the inside.

Then the doctor opened the door to his office, clapped my mother on the protruding ball of her shoulder, and gave us the good news. My mother turned to me, euphoric, and I…stuttered. My face furrowing as I waited to feel her joy. It seemed like something had been stolen from me. I'd been sitting next to her imagining the honesty that might descend on us in her final days. How, after twenty-six years, she might finally confess that I was the one true light of her life. And then, the aftermath. The relief I might feel to go through each day without her judgment. A life in which I didn't see every action I performed through her skeptical eyes. I didn't want her to die, but I couldn't help picturing how simple my life could be without her in it.

But. She was going to live. I smiled and recalibrated. I pushed my hand through her hair. The doctor explained that the problem was not an autoimmune disorder or leukemia, but a dysfunctional thyroid.

"Dysfunctional might be an understatement," he said. "This is one of the most advanced cases of hyperthyroidism I've ever seen."

He was surprised my mother hadn't begun exhibiting symptoms sooner. She turned her eyes away from him and said nothing. She had, of course, been exhibiting symptoms for several years now, but they were all glamorous—weight loss, heightened metabolism—it was only recently that they'd turned on her. Now, her body was slowly forgetting how to sleep. She woke in the middle of the night drenched in sweat, insomnia like salt in her bones. If sleep came to her, it would be interrupted by the audible discontent of her stomach. Hunger pangs strong enough to migrate her out of bed and into her office chair. Nights now wasted on gossip blogs and radio journals. More weight sloughing off her, until her slimness was no longer cosmetic but grotesque. She started dressing all in black and wearing layers of sweaters beneath her shirts. The skin, used to holding something inside, bagged around her neck, her arms, even around her small anklebones. She was so weak that even climbing the stairs was enough to make her heart race arhthmically inside her chest. Twice already she'd fainted while leading rehearsals at her studio.

The doctor told us her condition was advanced enough for him to recommend a more aggressive treatment: complete removal of the gland. My mother recoiled, but he soothed her by saying the procedure wouldn't be surgical, it wouldn't involve her doing anything more than swallowing a pill. Still, he said, looking down at her results, it would be best to complete the procedure as soon as she possibly could.

He explained that the pill would turn her, temporarily, radioactive. It sounded startling, but he assured us it was a relatively routine procedure. So routine he had a whole drawer full of pamphlets about its side effects in his desk. Yes, the pamphlets assured me, she would set off security alarms for almost six months. Yes, for the first forty-eight hours

she would need to avoid all human contact because she would be capable of irradiating small mammals. Yes, parts of her would decay like nuclear waste—with a half-life—until there was no thyroid remaining, only the absence of the gland in her throat.

He couldn't do the procedure himself; Gothic was too small of a town to have the facilities she would need. He recommended that I drive my mother down to the Front Range tomorrow and leave her in a hotel over the weekend. He told her to think of it as a vacation.

"After that," he said, looking at me. "It'll be safe for her to come back to your house. Although you should avoid drinking from the same cups, or washing in the same tub for at least a month. You shouldn't share anything with her for a while. She might be leaving small traces of radiation behind."

He folded up my mother's chart and tapped it twice against the table. We knew that was our cue to leave. The door to his office opened and we pushed ourselves out into the day. In the distance, the aspens hung their fall colors into the sky, shrugged their golden leaves over the mountains' shoulder. A breeze pushed my hair into my eyes. It was just past two in the afternoon.

Two

I walked with my mother up Main Street. Every so often she pressed on her throat, wrapped her fingers around her neck as if she could feel the defective gland. She wasn't speaking yet, just watching people move around her. There was plenty to see: men in Levis were wrapping string lights around the light posts and the storefronts, old women were pacing up and down the streets with lit sage, shaking the herbs at the sky. In front of the liquor store, a few men were bending tree branches into a giant statue shaped like a face.

This Friday was the Fall Equinox, a hippie holiday ignored in almost every other region of the world. But in Gothic it was bigger than Christmas. Maybe that's too much to say. It was big. Once, a reporter from *National Geographic* lived in town for the whole month of September and wrote a cover story about the festival. The council thought it would be good for tourism. It wasn't. The equinox was a celebration of the harvest, a warding off of the fears that came with blizzards and possible avalanches and the white disappearing of a mountain in December. It was also an easy excuse for indulgence. There was a joke about Gothic that went like this: we're a drinking town with a skiing problem.

All week, young girls would parade down Main Street in flower skirts and corsets, would lift a large wooden man over their heads and carry him to the town square. The man, named The Grump, was made entirely of sticks, green brush from backyards. He was hollow. Inside his cavernous chest, the town stuffed white scraps of paper with fears written on them—sick child, broken leg, bad health, long winter, high mortgage—and at the end of the festival we lit fire to The Grump and by burning him we abolished our fears. A pagan ritual, the kind of thing that thrived in this town.

Gothic was built on the old kind of faith, magic that buried itself in the dirt and snow. Of course my mother found her way here. Of course she was drawn to my father, a man born in this charmed valley. It was my mother who first taught me the magic of control, of transfiguration. One night when I was a girl the two of us walked out into the woods with a book of faerie magic. I carried paper and ink and candles. My mother lit the purple flame and the two of us scribbled out every piece of flesh we hated—her: knees, me: thighs, her: chin, me: my then too-small breasts. We burned every slip of paper, believing that we might expel all that loathing from our minds. We couldn't. Enchantment wasn't enough.

So she taught me the art of desire. The trick to being hungry and wanting it—the dry mouth, how grapefruit juice would settle in the stomach and staunch cravings. No dressing on salad, no breading on chicken. Small bites to trick the mouth into being full. I studied and practiced until my body learned to reverse its cues, until feeling full was the thing that made my stomach clench, not hunger. And in place of this fullness: anger. A life of craving.

There was something enchanted about my life now: living high enough in the mountains that sometimes I woke and found clouds hovering below my mother's house, feeling the altitude prick my ears each afternoon as I made the descent into town, celebrating pagan festivities and lunar holidays. In the months since I'd moved in with my mother and started helping her run her ballet studio, I'd felt an ethereal detachment from my body, the kind that usually only came from a night without sleep, watching the body move below the consciousness like it was a separate and solid cloud. It seemed that time had stopped for me. My mother never asked me if I was planning to leave soon; she seemed content to let me sleep in her spare room until the end of days.

Up until this day, I'd been the one relying on her. She'd cut back her own hours at the studio, determined to give me the illusion of usefulness. She said she could use the time

to work on her choreography, as if there were some great need for fresh ballet in a mountain town of under two thousand people. But now she would need me, too. The news of her impending procedure frustrated her. It was becoming clear on her face. Not because of the diagnoses, but because of the trouble it would inflict on her schedule.

"You'll have to do my work this weekend, too," she informed me. "We can't afford to miss two days of rehearsal; the production goes up in October."

My mother was mounting a production of *Swan Lake* at the community theater. There weren't enough local girls interested in ballet to put on the whole production, but she'd cobbled together enough bodies for a selection of scenes. As we walked towards her house, she listed off the responsibilities I'd need to take on this weekend—measuring the girls for the tutus, teaching them how to properly calamine their shoes, how to stitch the knots of their laces into their tights.

"August will be here this weekend," I reminded her, unsure if it was a protest.

"Bring him to the studio," she said. "He'd make a great teacher."

He would. August was my old ballet partner. We'd danced together since we were fifteen, although I hadn't seen him since I'd had my surgery six months ago and moved from DC back to Colorado to recover. Now, he was moving to Salt Lake City to become a principal dancer in their company. He planned to stop-off at my mother's house on his cross-country trip. He'd been hinting for weeks that I should pick up and move to Utah with him. He wanted to know how much longer I was planning to stay with my mother, if I was getting ready to start dancing again.

I didn't have any answers to his questions, but I was excited to see him. This was the longest the two of us had ever been apart. If I wanted to, I could raise my hands and paint his entire form in the air. In DC, we lived together, and I woke up early each morning to

help him tape up his body for rehearsal. He sat on our kitchen counter in nothing but his dance belt: padded beige underwear that tucked his genitals close to his body. In the back, it was similar to a thong but with thicker straps, to ensure that the skin at the waist and above the ass wasn't pinched. I lifted his left leg, massaged his calf until he flexed, pushing his heel into my ribs. I braced one hand under his ankle, reached down his body and wrapped a long, beige bandage around his hamstring. The hair on his thighs was dark, but sparse from years of this process, my small fingers binding the chaffing elastic around the skin. While I worked, he rolled his neck left and then right, tipped his chin up and studied our ceiling. His heel dug into my chest until I felt it change the rate of my pulse. After the thigh, I pulled out a roll of white athletic tape, pressed up the arches in his feet, and wound the tape around them.

After this, he willowed into his tights, a dance shirt, and tested my work. He lifted his heel into his hand and brought the extended leg towards his chest, until the heel was as high as his right ear. He released the foot from his hand and it remained, lifted. Then, holding the lift, he pivoted until his hips reversed his extension from *en avant* to *derrièr.* He raised his arms above his head, flourished at the wrists. I watched him, imagining my body for a moment becoming his: my thighs stretched wide with dark muscles, my arms practiced in lifting women, body trained to vault and then hang in the air. If I held perfectly still, I could feel the density swell into my own legs, could feel the strength. Then, I felt the strap of my bra dig into my shoulder and the illusion was broken. He ran through his *tendus,* hands on his hips as he tilted to the side and studied the arch of his foot. I could see the moment he was satisfied. He smiled the way a girl might smile: eyes down, mouth closed like it had something to hide.

Three

My mother and I took our time walking home. By the time she opened the front door it was dinnertime. She pulled a single hard-boiled egg out of the refrigerator, fractured its shell by rolling it over the counter. She picked the small pieces off one-by-one. So slowly. It was as if she didn't care if she ever uncovered what was beneath it. When the egg was bare, she split it in half with her fingers. She popped half of the egg white into her mouth. She chewed. She squeezed the yolk out of the half in her hand and dropped it into the trash.

There was yellow in the sky, too. Small strips of pink emerging beside the shallow clouds. The days were getting shorter. Leaving my mother to her pantomime of sustenance, I stepped onto her front porch. It was almost time for The Fox Lady to arrive.

The Fox Lady was my mother's closest neighbor. She lived at the opposite end of the street, but we could still see her when she walked out onto her porch each night. Her real name was Mrs. Feinstein and she lived with her daughter, one of my mother's favorite students, Lydia. The Fox Lady built her house herself. Its walls were made of aluminum and its roof was slanted like a chicken hut. In the winter, when the real winds appeared, her house would tremble like a spasming spine.

Every night, The Fox Lady sat cross-legged in an Adirondack chair and fed foxes from her front porch. She sat down and folded her legs, which were thin as chalk and just as fragile. She dropped a bag of hamburger at her feet. She dipped her hands into the bag and tugged red meat into her lap, balled the ground beef between her palms like she was packing a snowball. The rosy excess dripped between her fingers and pooled on her porch floor. One by one, she arched the bloody packages into her yard, towards the white teeth of the foxes that waited every night for her arrival. The foxes made no noise as they ate, except for

the few who were too slow to reach the food. These foxes beat their bodies into the wooden slats of her porch and keened in their dark throats, hungry. But by then it would be too late. The neighborhood dogs could scent out the foreign bodies and the raw hamburger and would come sprinting down the roads, pulling up dust as they panted towards The Fox Lady's yard.

The animals would scatter, but they'd be back the next night. They never got too close to her, never threatened her with their jaws. It was quite easy to tame a fox, The Fox Lady informed me once. She had an entire blog dedicated to the subject titled "Your Pet Fox." My mother didn't believe the animals were truly tame. She said they were a danger to the community. Sure, they were fine outside, but what if one wandered in an open porch door? Who knew how an animal like that would respond to accidentally trapping itself in someone's living room. Four times this month, she'd called the police on her neighbor. Four times, the police had discovered no evidence of the foxes, only my mother's word. They could do nothing without proof, they said.

My mother snicked open the porch door and entered the scene. She patted her stomach as if she were overly full. Behind her head, I caught a glimpse of something silver and glinting: trapped tinsel in a magpie's nest. My mother's hair lifted in the breeze and matched it for a moment. She stood next to me and the two of us watched as the feeding of the foxes reached its conclusion. A few streets down, we could see one of our neighbors sitting on his porch, drinking, while his daughter swung a wooly hat over her head. Blast off! the girl shouted, again and again, catapulting the hat into orbit over her head.

She leapt off her own porch and began rushing through the yard next door, her child body nearly disappearing in the tall cow's ears and Queen Anne's lace, the hat in the air the only thing to mark her place. Then, the hat collided with a string of lights over her

neighbor's front door. The glass bulbs shattered around her like plumage. She began to cry, burying her face in the hat, the thing that had caused all this trouble in the first place. Her father watched her, not moving, as she trembled and stomped at the broken glass around her feet.

"There should be an exam," my mother said.

"What?" I turned to face her.

"You should have to take an exam," she repeated, "in order to become a parent."

What I didn't say to her: this was not an exam I thought she could have passed. Although in my mother's defense, she never suspected she'd have to do it alone. My father had died when I was very young, leaving her only the legacy of this strange mountain town where he'd been born.

My mother and I had planned to go into town together that night for the beginning of the festivities, but her diagnoses had unsettled her. She told me I would have to make the trip alone. She leant me an old corset, a worn green skirt. She pulled a silver brush through my hair, braided in a strand of columbines. These days, I wore my hair down. No longer the tight-bunned prima donna of my youth. I liked how it felt when her fingers touched my scalp, parted the plaits, wove them together with a tenderness she'd never shown before.

After my hair was finished, she bent to cinch the buckles of my corset. It was a struggle for her to work some of them closed. This was one of her older costumes; she'd been certain it would fit. She'd made a point, when she was going to search for it, in mentioning that I wouldn't fit into any of the clothes she owned now. While my mother had shrunk, in the past six months I'd gained twenty pounds.

I was often startled by my reflection in mirrors, body now curving into the shape of an hourglass. It was foreign. Back when I was dancing, I used to sit on top of my covers

each night in the dark and push out the shape of my bones. I'd cup my fingers around the bulge of my knee, feel the height of it. Then I'd reach for my hips, drag my palm along its sharp ridge. Next the collarbone, which I always pushed on a bit harder than I knew I should. I liked to feel the fragility of it. Sharp elbows, the narrow arch of my shinbone rising out of my skin. Sometimes I'd be so excited by my own body that I'd slip my fingers inside myself and pant into my pillow. Amazed, then, by how easy it was for a woman to touch the inside of herself.

Now I could feel only the suggestions of those bones. My whole body was soft and full of give. I tried to never touch myself; when I stripped for showers I turned away from the mirrors and closed my eyes in the water to avoid looking down. When my mother touched me, I could feel the sharpness of her bones over my skin.

The final buckle slid into place. My mother nodded and returned to her seat on the porch. She lifted a glass of water to her lips and imperceptibly sipped. It was clear that I'd been dismissed. I walked away from her, but turned back to look at her one last time. A breeze climbed behind me. The wind kicked up from the ground, white blooms of the Queen Anne's lace scattering like buckshot, their color like snow. The pollen salted into my mother's hair like it was erasing her.

Four

Some of our more theatrical citizens arrived at the festival on horseback. They sauntered down the streets, heedless of the droppings they left behind, and hitched their animals to a post next to the El Dorado Saloon. A few of the girls rode sidesaddle.

I had some experience with horses; my mother used to try to raise them. The summer after my father died, she bought a horse for a dollar at the county fair. The man's first owner had been cruel, but my mother believed she could break him. She saved his life and in return he taught her body a new way to move—pitched from her back, hard spine of the Colorado dirt beneath her. She spent the season in yellow and purple skin. It affected the way she ran her ballet classes. We spent a lot of time watching movies in the daylight, not rehearsing. It was the only moment in the day she could rest. She would dim the lights and touch the tender scallops on her arms, small shrapnel of dirt and twigs caught beneath her body.

That was the summer she showed us all her tapes of Nureyev and Fonteyn: those famous dance partners. All the girls gathered together at the front of the room, shoulders pressed together as we watched Nureyev crawl after Fonteyn on his knees. He pressed his face to her skirts, inhaled gracelessly. It seemed comical to me, pathetic. I laughed at him, and the other girls followed my lead. We beat at the floor with our fists, the heels of our slippers. Our laughter was endless, until finally my mother stood up and shut off the tape. We switched off, too. In the silence after our fit, my mother lifted up her metal folding chair and bucked it to the ground, her eyes searching even as she hooved at the floor with her un-broken foot.

"Tell me," she said. "What do any of your know about love?"

Eventually, my mother stopped trying to ride the horse. But she never gave him away. She kept him in a pen all of his own. She could barely even get him to eat from her hand. The summer I was fourteen, already imagining the cities I would live in far away from my home, I crept into his enclosure and waited as he galloped at me, rumbling. He slowed as he drew up next to me. He looked into my eyes. I put my hand on his face and he pushed into my warmth. It was one of those moments of startling clarity, when my whole life seemed to stretch away from me like a string. I would move to the east coast. I would become a famous ballerina, more famous than my mother. I would leave this town and I would never return.

What is it about animals that make us calm? My mother came the closest to gentleness when we were with her horses. I'd hold sugar cubes in my palm and she would praise my double *pirouette* or my extension and then, in the same breath, say that the only thing holding me back was *this*—and then she'd slap the rise of my ass or the soft v of my thighs. Still. There was the praise. When I moved away, she sold them all and never told me the reason why.

The horses at the festival were tied to hitches at the end of the street. They stamped the ground with their heart-sized hooves and waited for their people to return. I imagined how they would react at the end of the night, when their drunken owners returned and struggled onto their backs.

My costume was mild compared to the other girls in town—wire corsets, plump skirts with cushioned bustles beneath them. They skipped up and down the streets. They carried small lanterns in their hands. Their breasts spilled over the tops of their shirt and they let them, reached down and tugged until even more of the pink flesh peaked out of the cloth. They set their eyes on men dressed in pirate shirts or green spandex. They tucked

Indian paintbrush and sky pilots behind their ears. In the center of the square, a pregnant woman was conducting pagan wedding ceremonies, called hand-fastings. She tied the couples' four hands together with hemp and whispered over their wrists, rubbed the soft hair of their forearms. This was all it took, in Gothic, for a man and a woman to wed.

I'd like to be clear: there was nothing holy about this scene. None of these people were true believers. They wanted to drink whiskey with flowers in their hair, wanted to see a fat bosom in a corset. When I described the scene to August, years earlier in DC, he wouldn't believe that it was as debauched as I led him to believe. But it was. I walked by the El Dorado Saloon and a tall man with blonde hair waved down at me. I didn't know him.

"Sweetheart," he called to me. "Come up and let me buy you a drink."

It's difficult to say no to another person's desire. I walked up the stairs and let the man buy me a drink. Then another. I won't tell you his name; he won't appear later in the story. We drank together at the bar and then I followed him home to his apartment where he lifted the small metal clasps on my corset and pushed my breasts up with his large hands. He put his wide fingers in my hair and picked out the columbine, lifted out the tucked strands of my braid. Naked, loose haired. All of my mother's touches were removed. I moved to turn off the light but was too slow; he'd caught sight of my stomach. He looked at the long scar that crossed just above my pubic hair, curved like the top half of a question mark.

"Sit down," he said.

He pushed on my shoulder until I was lying below him. He was still standing. He put his hand on my right hip and followed the raised line of my skin with his thumb.

"I think single moms are so sexy," he said.

"It's not a C-section scar," I told him.

He touched it again; I could tell he didn't believe me.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Work accident," I joked. "I used to be a magician's assistant. He tried to cut me in half and—whoops—turned out he hadn't been practicing enough."

"What?" The man didn't understand.

"Hazards of the job," I said. "I knew what I was getting into."

I turned over and pushed my backside towards him. I didn't want him to look at me anymore.

Five

I was back home before the sun rose, but my mother was already awake, peeling the skin of an apple in one long strip. Another sleepless night for her.

"Well," she said, "which was it this time: boy or girl?"

"Neither," I said. "Ghost."

"You're not as clever as you think you are."

"That depends doesn't it? On whether or not I think I'm particularly clever."

"You know," she said, reprising a familiar argument, "you'll have to chose one over the other at some point."

"You sound ignorant," I said. The barb didn't hurt her; she smiled as if she'd won the argument. I started up the stairs and she stopped me again.

"August called for you," she said. "He just passed through Colby; he should get here by dinnertime tonight."

I nodded, walked upstairs, and dressed for my run. This was my new routine since my surgical stitches had healed. Each morning I woke a few moments earlier, so I could press my forehead to the window and watch as the startling dark faded into a cool grey, as the sun split the world into horizon and ground. It was something startling: a sliver of light illuminating the bisecting line of the horizon, the green of the pine tree, the light beige of the roads.

My running socks never matched. This morning one was purple with polka dots, the second grey with a hole over the arch. I tucked them inside the pink florescence of my running shoes and stretched my calves by hanging my heels over the steps in my garage. Down, up, down, up, I lifted and fell with a ten second hold on each side. I pulled my

elbows over my head and cracked my neck. Then, finally, I turned away from the apartment and began beating my feet down the gravel road.

By then, if I had timed it right, there was be just enough light to see only two or three feet in front of me. This was my favorite moment of my day, the only moment I could step outside of my body and see myself as nothing but motion. It lasted only a few seconds and then my awareness returned. I began to hear beats, the pulse of my feet against the ground—one two three, one two three—my sharp pants turning waltz.

Ballet is the sort of art that's often romanticized. Girls in pink tutus, hems adorned with rubies. But it's an art that relies so much on equivocation; impossible contrasts existing simultaneously. Costumes that appear glamorous from a distance, but up close are made of the gaudiest costume jewelry, the stiffest of fabrics. It takes a fake sort of ruby to shine on the back rows of a theatre.

And the girls are not the innocent ingénues they appear to be. I remember when I first moved to the city, before I had August as my ally. I was fourteen. I lived in a dormitory with fifty other girls, all of whom wanted to become prima ballerinas. I've read a lot of stories where young girls live together and bond and make each other strong, but I don't think the people who write those stories have ever been young and a girl and truly alone. In this story, we all watched each other like we were taloned birds. We refused to ask each other for help with the simplest thing: washing our laundry, mending tights, using a phone card to call home. We shouted at each other under the slightest provocation. Living alone left us breathless; we used all our concentration to convince ourselves that we were adults, that we could take care of ourselves. It became insulting for anyone to assume we might need them, to try to push their intimacy into our lives. By day, we stood side by side in the

mirror and practiced moving in perfect synchronicity, but at night we scowled at each other while we brushed our teeth, judged each other by the name brand on our underwear.

I refused to change in front of my roommate because that year my nipples finally started to swell away from my skin, miniature breasts pushed themselves free. A slick curve grew between my waist and my widening hips. Puberty was catching and pulling my body away from its girl-thin shape. Everyone in the dorm noticed. They nicknamed me "Thunder Thighs." One afternoon, my roommate pulled me aside and told me she could help me. She held up a small jar in her hand. Inside was a cramped white body. She said it was a tapeworm. That if she fed it to me it would suck up the extra food in my stomach and help me stay thin.

The two of us sat across from each other on the grey carpet of our floor. Above us, a silver frost coated our window and pointed its fingers towards the icy sky. My roommate stood and lowered the blinds. She locked our door.

"You know," she said to me, "you might gag."

"Don't let me," I said.

She raised her delicate hand and I saw the body in the jar. She tapped it into her palm and dropped it down my throat. Then, she pinched my nose and mouth closed until she saw me swallow, the same way she might force-feed a dog. I squeezed the pale body down my throat and tapped her on the wrist, but she kept her hands tight against my breathing for a few seconds more. I didn't know why: slow reflexes, that very human desire to hold an entire life in her fingers.

That night I curled up in my bed and held my own fingers over my nose and mouth in the exact same way, waiting for the rush of the fear to quell the nausea roiling inside of me. Over the next few weeks, I waited for my body to drain, for the parasite inside me to

suck up the carbohydrates from my stomach and dissolve them. Imagining the worm inside of me all those weeks, I could feel a crooked sort of power growing in my gut. I was lightheaded with fantasy and nausea. I thought I could feel the thing breathing inside of me: light twitches in my lower back, a heart beat in my kidneys. I imagined its teeth. Everything I dropped down my throat I chose with such precision, imagining that second mouth inside of me.

A few weeks later, my roommate revealed that she'd fed me a dead maggot she'd found in a winter puddle. She laughed. It was a prank she'd planned with her friends. I think she thought it would defeat me, but it had the opposite effect. It was as though something real had grown inside of me that afternoon. From that day on, I sunk my teeth in. I stuck. I found new ways to stay small. I bloodied my feet on the dance floor for extra hours each afternoon. I learned to press the handle of a fork down my throat to avoid the telltale pink finger of bulimia.

The sun climbed higher and pink scarred its way out from behind the mountain, ragged and rough like a stretch mark. The light ricocheted off the painted roofs of my neighbors: white and green and burnt red. I could look down and see the flushed skin of my thighs, how the edges of them shook and trembled each time my foot struck the pavement. It was all about outrunning my own gaze now, my own eyes on my own softness. Although in this moment my eyes became my mother's, watched me the way she watched me those years I lived with her and she taught me how to starve. The sun hit me directly and the small dimples on my legs appeared. I remembered how different I looked now from the girl I used to be.

I ran a long circle around the sparse houses of my neighborhood, the burnt grass color of a fading mountain summer, excepting the few houses that wasted weeks and water

attempting to keep their yards living: neat grass, flowers in clusters of white and pink and red and white again. Miss Louise's begonias, fainting in the wet summer air. Inevitably, of course, the gardens would wilt as the sun scorched it the color of sand. The cows ears and Queen Anne's lace and ragweed would push their roots back in. Nothing here remained neat or tame.

I arrived home, skin colored like an emergency, shirt sticking to my stomach and showing off a small roll of fat over my compressions shorts. I walked up the stairs and stripped, turned the knob on the shower all the way to cold.

I allowed myself ten minutes in the shower: five minutes to wash my hair and two minutes per leg so I could shave. I had been using the same razor for two months, and I could feel the dull blades catch and saw half-heartedly at my stubble. Already the skin bubbled with itch. I lathered my calves up again with the soap, pressing my thumbs into their fleshy bulge. Beneath the softness there was a hard triangle: the dancer's calf. A muscle I would never lose. I pointed my foot and raised it off the ledge where I'd been balancing it to shave. I wanted to see how high the ligament would extend. My toes reached above my forehead, but I didn't look at them. Instead, I looked at the purple scar over my missing ovary.

I wondered how I would look to August when he saw me for the first time in almost four months. Would he notice the soft curve of my thighs, how my collarbone no longer pushed noticeably through my skin? Would he react to my new shape? I was ashamed to think of how he might pity me. I wished there were actually some magical solution for me. I wished that I could travel back in time and swallow a real tapeworm that day in my dorm room, so I would never have to worry about my body again. So I could be more like my mother.

I stepped out of the shower and looked at myself in the mirror. My chest still flushed from exercise. For a second, I couldn't help but see myself as a powerful thing. I remembered how my thighs tightened each time my feet hit the dirt. How easily I breathed, how simply I moved. Then the fog faded from the mirror, my skin rippled and paled. Again, the scar stood out vividly on my flesh. I watched the pucker of cellulite quiver with my steps.

Downstairs, the coffee machine blinked on and performed its choking, dripping routine. Wet-haired, I filled my cup and walked back outside to sit on the steps of my mother's porch. It was not yet eight am, and now there was nothing remaining for me to do but to sit in the bright sun for as long as my skin could stand, until it was afternoon and time for me to drive my mother into the city so she could lift a pill over her lips and let it turn her blue veins nuclear.

I thought of her, a few rooms over, preparing for her body to dissolve a piece of itself. I thought of August, driving steadily through the plains, heading towards his new life. Everyone with their choreographed motions to fill and me, alone on the porch, feeling the button of my jeans press against the soft skin of my stomach. It was impossible to escape how regressed my life had become: living in my mother's home, sharing her job. I was as dependent on her as I had been when I was a teenager. I counted my breaths until finally the rhythm of it overwhelmed the trembling in my hands, the staccato beat inside of my asking *what now what now what now.*

Six

My mother didn't wake up until noon. I heard her running the water to the shower while I sat on my bed and looked at reviews of past performances from Salt Lake City's ballet. An impressive reimagining of *Firebird,* a new piece based on the life of Nureyev and Fonteyn, *Don Quixote.* It didn't have the prestige of ABT, but August would do well there; they had only a few male principals so he'd be guaranteed a variety of roles.

My mother walked into my room, dressed only in her underwear.

"I think my suitcase is still in your closet," she said.

Before I'd moved back home, she'd turned my room into a giant closet for the things she no longer used. This included her luggage. It also included the years of junk I'd collected as a girl. Living in my old bedroom was like living in a shrine to myself. The walls were still the same nauseating pink I'd chosen when I was six. Bulletin board after bulletin board was still filled with ticket stubs and reviews from performances I'd viewed, pictures of me in tights. A box in the corner overflowed with the pointe shoes I'd worn-out over the years. Next to that a bag of my shoe prepping supplies: a hammer to beat at the box until it softened, a zippo to cauterize the ends of my laces, a stitch kit. An entire closet full of the pink dresses with bows I'd been obsessed with wearing to school. Anyone walking into my mother's house would think she still lived with a fourteen-year-old girl.

"I washed my sheets," my mother said. "The room's all prepped for August to stay there."

"Thank you," I said, refusing to look up from my computer. I didn't want to examine her naked form.

"That's assuming he evens wants the other room."

"Why wouldn't he?"

"I don't know," she said. "I didn't want to presume. God knows I don't understand the relationship the two of you have."

"We're friends," I said. "August will not be sleeping in my bed."

I looked up and came eye to eye with her stomach. The skin hung down over the hollow of her bellybutton like she was molting. She was so thin I wondered if she even weighed one hundred pounds anymore. Her mouth sprawled across the sink of her cheekbones, widening when she spoke like a blowhole. Her eye sockets pressed into her skin far enough that the rounded sides of her eyes showed. If she hugged me, I knew I would be aware of the weight around my hips, how it caught on her fingers and pulled.

She didn't hug me, of course. She rolled her eyes when I called August my friend and dragged her suitcase out of my room. I realized it had been months since I'd been touched—not in the simple way, the sex way—but the way that mattered. I wanted someone to cup my shoulder as they spoke to me, to rest their arm around the back of my chair, to set their head on my shoulder when they were tired.

As a girl, I used to sleep on my father's chest. He was a heavy man, and his stomach rolled out over the button of my pants. When I turned eleven, my mother bought me my first scale, reminding me that I'd have to watch the "chubby" genes from my father's side of the family. But I wasn't worried about counting calories when I was five; I napped on the fat pillow of his stomach.

When I was older, I would imagine what my life might have been like if he hadn't died. Usually at the dinner table. During meals, I chewed food and then, turning away from the table, spit the food into my hand and fed it to the dog. My mother's friends that visited found it charming how much he loved me. They laughed at how he crowded my chair

during meals. And each time I did it, I'd look up at my mother and smile, like it was all a performance designed exactly for her. I ate only lettuce, lifting each leaf with my fingers and placing it on my tongue. My mother, nothing on her plate, slipping into the kitchen after dinner and gnawing away at discarded chicken legs, lamb bones, suckling at the fragments of meat clinging to the ribs. I would resurrect him sometimes at night, place him at the end of the dinner table, watch him spoon ribs, and beef, and bar-b-que onto our plates.

Seven

The closest hospital to us was fifty minutes away in Gunnison. We drove down towards the Front Range and the high mountains were replaced with beige shrubs. River rapids finally slowing their summer frenzy, preparing for the inevitable fall freeze. My mother drove and I pressed my feet against the beat-up dashboard in her old SUV. The sky stilled around us, the color of slate. It was the pigment of rain without the promising dampness. No breeze.

In town, we went out to lunch. My mother called it her Last Meal. A laughable concept if I'd ever heard one; she'd never even eaten a first meal. I ordered a chicken fried steak as a statement and pushed my knife greedily through the tough meat. My mother walked to the salad bar and created a meal of mathematical portions: one slice of lettuce with seven boiled shrimp, six tomato wedges, and eight hearts of palm. She cut each shrimp in half at least twice and then speared each one with a fraction of a tomato, a heart, two shreds of lettuce and then swallowed it quickly, maybe without chewing. I watched her jaw flex. Sweat beaded on her lip from the simple exertion of moving her teeth. Just looking at her took away my appetite, but I raised my fork to my lips in protest of the sensation.

This was not the first time my mother had been to a hospital. When she was young, only sixteen, she let a surgeon fill her mouth with ether and drain the fat from her breasts. All of this in aid of her ballet career. She was fifty-four now and they still looked strange. She had the tightening around the waist that suggested a larger bust, but instead her shoulders and chest formed a trim rectangle. The top half of her a geometric constant. Their removal might not have even been worth it, in the end. At twenty-one, breastless, she was the up-and-coming star of the Kansas City Metro Ballet, prima ballerina in a production of *Giselle*.

Then, during afternoon barre, she didn't stretch her ankles and in the cold studio snapped her Achilles tendon with a clear pop. She never danced again.

Her life was something different then: afternoons spent walking up and down florescent supermarkets with me in her cart, shopping for dinner, planning casseroles, and teaching me to brush my own hair. I can remember her so clearly, showing me how to grate the cheese when her own hands shook, how to lift on my toes and spin sizzling meat around in the pan. Always cooking, never eating. For many years her mothering distracted her from fully realizing what she'd lost. Children are so reassuring in their earliest state, when they're all sincere affection and no desires of their own. Out of my shapeless mold she crafted a miniature version of her own desires, drilling me on French terms and shaping my fingers into their most graceful bend, her own personal body double: the two of us with wrists like the legs of crows.

As if she could sense me thinking about her, my mother looked up.

"Where' s your mind at?" she said.

"Nowhere," I said. She picked up the third shrimp on her plate and dropped it.

"I'm ready," she said. "Let's go."

We walked three blocks over to the hospital. Upstairs, we sat in the waiting room and studied the ugly blue and green prints of the hospital chairs. We tapped opposing rhythms against the fake wood of their armrests with our thumbs.

A nurse opened the door and called my mother's name. My mother slapped her hands against her small thighs and stood. She gestured to me and the two of us walked up the stairs alone. We opened the door to a perfectly square office with pale tiles and a bench covered in white paper. The nurse looked at the two of us side by side.

"This is your daughter?"

It was always like this with people. I knew the physical similarities between us had drained away when she lost so much weight. The wide cheeks that we used to share, the flared shape of our hips; even at our thinnest they curved away from our waists like bells. All of this was gone now and instead we were just two bodies, shaped liked opposite ends of an ad for weight loss drugs. I hated standing beside her in the stark lighting of this room. I wanted to disappear.

Let me be clear: I wanted my mother to have the procedure. I wanted her to get well. But. I wished I didn't have to witness it. Looking at her easy slimness made me feel like a frayed rope soaking up seawater.

"This is my daughter," my mother said.

The nurse ran through the list of things the two of us would need to watch. I shouldn't drink out of the same cup as my mother for at least a week. We should be sure to use different bathrooms. She would need to wash all of her clothes separately from mine.

"We know," I said. And in that moment I thought about greater dangers, how my mother was removing an essential part of her self, how for the rest of her life she'd have to take two pills a day to simulate the effects of a functional thyroid. How artificial she might become.

The nurse walked out of the room to retrieve the doctor and I looked at my mother, small spheres of sweat on her head. I wanted to touch her brow and, against my better instincts, I leaned forward and did. She startled at my touch.

"Rosalind," she said. She took my hand and our clasped fingers hovered just over my stomach, right above my scar. "You're so much like me. Sometimes I just can't stand it."

Before I could answer, the doctor walked into the room. He handed her a flimsy cup filled with her pills and listed the side effects back to her again. Then he handed her a cup of

water. My mother held them both in her hand. Then, she sat the cup down on the floor and, with her free hand, reached out towards me. I grabbed ahold and we sat there linking fingers and looking at the floor. She lifted the pill over her throat and opened her teeth.

Eight

My mother wouldn't even let me drive her to her hotel; she wanted to take a cab. I sat beside her to say goodbye and she leaned away as if she was afraid she might truly harm me. I left her in the hospital and she waved, told me she'd be ready for me to pick her up on Monday.

"Say hello to August for me," she said.

Driving home, alone, I remembered the last time I had been to the hospital. It wasn't a prepared trip like my mother's; I'd been rushed there in the middle of the night. I'd just completed my final performance of *Coppelia.* I woke up with such a fierce pain that the doctors almost misdiagnosed it as appendicitis. An x-ray revealed a ruptured ovarian cyst. They put me to sleep and cut a blunt line above my pubic bone and pulled out my left ovary. When I woke up, August was there. He put his hand on my elbow and looked at me while the doctor explained that there were dozens and dozens of cysts spidering their fingers across my remaining ovary, preventing proper menstruation. I would probably, they told me, never be able to have children.

They brought in a cot and let August spend the night. They thought the two of us were married. All night, while he snored, I lay awake in the bed and felt that something was coming to life inside me, a gapped jaw opening in my chest. I could have seen this coming, could have stopped myself from needing the surgery. I'd never had a normal menstrual cycle, but I'd never seen a doctor about it. I'd assumed my anorexia was to blame for my lack of periods. I couldn't risk going to the doctor without exposing the thing that was keeping me thin, keeping me dancing.

And now here I was: barren at twenty-six. I wanted to disappear. On television, a local news station was replaying an old performance of August and me performing *Swan*

Lake. I watched my flickering body move across the stage as this beautiful man chased me and hordes of swan girls surrounded me. I felt like I was watching a stranger. In the corners of the stage Rothbart, bird of prey, lingered. I was fascinated by the way my body performed exactly at his command. Perfect symmetry, that alien thing, impossible in the human form. All night I watched my fairy tale self and thought of how the sort of fantasy I wanted was not the girl in white, the swan neck, but rather to be the thing in command. The monster and not the gossamer wing. I wanted, if my body was shifting, for it to be into something stronger than its original self. A fanged thing, an animal without struts in its bones.

In the morning, the doctors delivered the killing blow: they told me I wouldn't be able to dance again for at least six months. They sent me home to recover in my mother's house. I slept in my old bed and ate six meals a day. I could hardly motivate myself to even answer the phone when August called.

After a few weeks of this my mother announced that I couldn't keep staying with her rent-free. She told me I'd be coming to work with her at the studio in the afternoons. Then she bought me the running shoes, a not-so-subtle hint. Then she threw out every loaf of bread in the house. We are not the kind of family, she announced, that eats their feelings.

Sometimes, in the afternoons, I would cast the covers off my body and study myself with a critical gaze. I'd never wanted children before, but now I missed the possibility of having them. I'd done this to myself. I'd let ambition over-take the primary objective of my body: to create life. And even knowing this, that dancing had almost killed me, I still wanted to return to that world. The idea of grace, of movement. Like there was a long strut running through my bones, hollowing me out for any other desire I might have.

I was home in time to see The Fox Lady perform her ritual again. Tonight I only watched her with half an eye. I was waiting to see something else: the grey body of August's

truck moving up my hill. Soon, I thought. Any minute now. The yellow leaves of the aspens shook in the wind. The sun sank in the sky like a blind eye, watching me. It would be winter soon. In the mountains, we got our first snowfall as early at October. I could barely remember what that sort of stillness felt like.

I walked inside and began combing through my hair with my mother's silver brush. I pulled out thin strands and braided them. Unbraided them. I started warming up a curling iron and then, just as impulsively, unplugged it. I pulled my hair back from my face and worked my fingers through a remembered routine: pinning my hair into a bun. I dotted concealer under my eyes, lined my eyes with khol and plumped my lashes. I was trying to remember how I used to look, before I'd let myself go. I wanted to seem familiar to him.

I went back outside. There. His truck twisting up the mountain curves. I tracked it until it pulled into my driveway and then, looking past it, I saw a second car pull in next to him. August stepped out of his truck first. I'd nearly forgotten what his face looked like. Intimacy can do that sometimes: you lose your impression of a person's nose, the color of their eyes and instead you remember the pitch of their laugh, the smell of their sweat. August stepped over to the car next to his and opened the driver's door. A woman stepped out. Her hair was golden and curled, like a girl from a children's book. Her legs were as thin as children's legs. She put her hand on her chest when she stepped out of her car, as if just breathing in this high air were enough to tax her lungs.

August put his arm around the woman. He began walking with her towards me.

"Rosalind," he said. "Here we are."

II.

Am I still the only one who knows about your mother? The other ballerinas, they thought your life was so easy. Because your mother was famous. Because she could teach you the way this world was supposed to work. But I went home with you once for Christmas; I met your mother. When she greeted us in the airport, I mistook her for a chauffer. That's how expressionless she looked. It was the first time she'd seen you in almost two years. She kept talking about the expense of the plane ticket, how hard it had been to take time off from her studio to drive into the airport. She said nothing to me.

The joke around the studio was that you were an animal. When your temper flared, they called for me. Bring in the trainer, they'd say, the lion's on the prowl again. You had that small glimmer of your mother's anger inside of you, but I knew how to slow you down. If you're such a great dancer, I said to you once, then prove it to me. You laughed and executed a perfect sequence of entrechats. *You liked your temper, said it made you like Nureyev, who once had a lover that opened every letter by writing* my dearest, beautiful monster.

We carved space between the other passengers as we walked to collect our bags. It was always this way with ballerinas in a crowd. Something about our posture: chins up, feet turned out even in our tennis shoes, straight backs, silent feet against the tiled ground. You were ignoring me, too. Crossing your arms, practicing your mother's distant stare.

Do you remember telling me how she used to hold matches under your toes to make you stretch higher?

At home, your mother walked us up the stairs, paused in front of the door to your room and finally looked at me. She said something about making up a bed on the couch and you just shook your head. He's like my brother, you said.

Well, there's a big difference between "like" and "is."

I remember your room. It was filled with pink: toe shoes, dresses, bulletin boards with well-wishes from other girls. Tacked to the wall was a giant photo of you dipped in your mother's arms. You were young. In the photo, your mother is attempting a fish dip, but you won't cooperate, have turned your face up to look into your mother's eyes. You have the same braid down the side of your heads, the same dark eyes. You've even pouted your lips to match her expression. I understood now how you'd become so good at following the tempo of other dancers, how you had trained yourself to follow another body like it was your own reflection.

I never minded when you were angry.

While I was brushing my teeth, you stripped to your bra and got into bed. You were already sleeping by the time I walked back into the room. I didn't get into the bed next to you. It wasn't the nakedness that bothered me; we'd shared a bed before. But I felt like I needed to stay alert, to protect you from something I couldn't explain. All night, I sat up and stared at that picture of your mother hanging on your wall. I knew I was seeing a part of you that you'd never shown to anyone.

One

The woman was an obstetrician. She and August had met in DC. She was also in the process of moving to Utah.

"So you're moving together," I said.

"I wouldn't say 'together,'" the obstetrician said. "There's a very good position at one of the hospitals there. It just happened to open up at the same time that August got his offer."

But she turned and looked at August, as if expecting him to argue with her, to affirm that they were, in fact, moving together.

"We're definitely not moving together," August said. "We've only been dating for two months."

The obstetrician nodded once more to confirm. Looking at the two of them, side-by-side, I announced that I was going to cook dinner. I wanted to impress them. I drove into town, swerving around the girls dressed in corsets and the boys watching them, and bought everything I would need to make my homemade risotto. When I came home from the store, she and August were spread out on the floor, flipping through my mother's record collection. It's strange, isn't it, the moments our bodies chose to become possessive? I hated how comfortable she looked in my home. I said nothing. As I walked inside, August turned towards me and grinned, balancing himself on her shoulder.

"I've got a joke to tell you," he said. "I've been practicing it all afternoon."

"Okay," I said.

"What's a pig's favorite ballet?"

"I know this one," I said. He was still holding onto the obstetrician's shoulder. "It isn't funny."

"Swine Lake!"

Neither of us laughed. He let go of the obstetrician's shoulder and looked at us both.

"Come on." He insisted. "It's a little funny."

I laughed. It was my mother's false laugh: slender, fine dust rasp like chalk on the tongue. We were looking straight into each other eyes, except that we were not. I was looking at August's chin. He was staring at the circle pock of scar beneath my left cheekbone. I walked into the kitchen and unloaded the groceries in my arms: chicken and rice and basil and pine nuts and a dozen other ingredients. I began setting them out on the counter.

I heard the obstetrician—no I won't give her a name—laugh. From where I stood, I was still essentially in the same room as them, only separated by our island sink. I had to turn my back to cut the vegetables and dice the garlic. I could hear nothing but silence behind me, short whispers. I wondered how close the two of their faces might be.

"Hey," I said, "could you put on some music?"

"We're trying," the girlfriend said. "But August is being such a pill."

August made a noise of complaint. I turned. The two of them had not moved since I'd last looked.

"Rosalind," the girlfriend said. "Tell August that his taste in music is uncomfortably antique."

"You like old music, August."

"Tell him it's time to catch up to this century."

"Catch up to this century," I said, parroting.

"Now tell him to listen to me and put this Belle and Sebastian album on."

I stood, tomato in hand, my dumb bird mouth repeating her.

August shook his head and pulled *Rumors* out of its paper sleeve.

"Everyone can agree on Stevie Nicks," he said.

"Witchy woman," I said, smiling.

The girlfriend lay down on the carpet and slung her arm over her eyes, waiting for the music to start. Her denim shorts rose high, and I could see how the carpet left circle imprints down the backs of her thighs, faux dimples of cellulite. In that pose, she reminded me of my mother, who used to spend every afternoon of my childhood this way: record spinning, eyes closed. She'd come to the floor straight out of the shower, towel wrapped around her waist and hair damp, wetting the floors like a sea creature's limbs. She'd spend her afternoons here, eyes shut, Prokofiev or Tchaikovsky filling up our home. It was clear, looking at her then, that she'd traveled back in time, that she was living her life before me. The life of her as a dancer. If I moved across the room too quickly and startled her, I could watch the awareness return to her, mouth and eyes opening in tandem as if to say, *so here I am, back in this body again.*

Perhaps because she craved transformation so fully, she taught me to believe in charm. Showed me videos of Kirkland dancing the dewdrop fairy, Fonteyn as the sugar plum fairy, the illustrious snow queen. She made me mesh skirts and sewed long flowers onto their hems, dressed me in them each afternoon and called me her fairy girl. I spun about the yard in my gauzy dresses and leapt from the limbs of trees, imitating flight. When it rained, and circles of mushrooms popped into the center of our yards, I sat inside them, hoping to be stolen away to another realm. She called me a will-of-the-wisp, as weightless as air, and tossed me in her arms. Even then, I was valued only for my lightness.

As though the girlfriend could hear my thoughts, she called to me from the floor.

"Rosalind," she said, "your real last name isn't actually 'Bird' is it?"

She was looking at an old poster of August and me that my mother had tacked to the living room wall. In it, he was dipping me forward, right into the letters of my last name.

"No," I said. "It's a stage name. I inherited it from my mother."

"Your mother was a ballerina, too?"

"Not for long. She snapped her Achilles tendon when she was twenty-one."

The girlfriend blew air out between her teeth, feigning a shudder of fear. She asked what my real last name was, and when I told her 'Glass' she laughed.

"That sounds like a stage name, too. Why'd she change it?"

"Her last name was Kirkovich. Glass is my father's name."

August's fingers finally found the record, slipped it from its sleeve, settled it down. The music started and I returned to my cooking. I could imagine the two of them dancing, spinning their hips and waving their hands. How the girl's yoga pants would roll over at the top and slip lower on her taut hips. Her tank top would climb up above her belly button until August could see the bottom notches of her ribs, ladder rungs waiting for a hand to climb.

I hunted through my mother's drawers for a half-sharp knife. I remembered living with August. He had a bad habit of rearranging our drawers each time he washed the dishes. Sometimes I would find the skillets mixed in with the Tupperware bowels, knifes speared into the pasta strainer. I scalloped through the breast of the meat and August walked into the kitchen and stood beside me, chewing at the skin on the inside of his cheek. I set the chicken and the cutting board aside, pulled out a new knife, and began chopping an onion. August

still watching me. When he got this look in his eye, I knew he was about to attempt philosophy.

"It's amazing," he said. "The things I learn from watching you."

"What do you mean?"

"Like that. Right there. The way you pulled that knife through that white skin. It's fucking poetic."

Poor boy. He had never seen anyone chop an onion before. I turned from him and scattered the chicken into a saucepan, let the sizzle overtake what August was continuing to say to me about the importance of what we'd done together. The beautiful and platonic ideal of our friendship; how progressive we were. It was one of his favorite riffs. How much he'd learned from me about the way that women worked.

I couldn't listen; risotto was one of those dishes that required constant attention. I skipped the rice in beside the chicken and smothered them both with pesto and white wine. Thick liquid trembling as it reached a boil. For me, cooking provided a pleasure that eating never would. There was always a hard kick of anxiety with each bite I took, but the creation of the food had none of that guilt. I especially loved cooking for others, the expression on their faces as they opened their mouths and swallowed.

I turned my wrist and spoon through the rice over and over, folding in the chicken and the tomatoes and, finally, a heavy spoonful of butter. The air grew thick, fatty. I could feel its greasy coat on my teeth, could feel my stomach clenching in anticipation. I liked myself best when I was hungry, but today the satisfaction I usually felt while cooking eluded me. The noise of August, still speaking, pulling me out of the half-meditative mood I so enjoyed.

The girlfriend walked into the kitchen, too, and August restarted his statement about platonic love. She looked at him and turned towards me.

"Look at the color of this dish," she interrupted him. "So gorgeous."

I turned towards her so that the two of us were meeting eyes and August was cut out completely. I knew exactly what I was doing; it was a trick I'd learned from my mother. So much of what she'd taught me about food could be translated into a lesson about affection. She possessed the power of resistance, the ability to tamp down hunger until the crunch of an almond felt like pure decadence. She could mimic this effect in her relationships, holding people at a great distance for days and days and then offering them a quick bone of kindness, the soft catch of her thumb on their cheek. They were so starved for this moment they could live on it for weeks. I, occasionally, had something of this skill.

I turned away from August and the girlfriend and continued stirring. I felt myself wishing, although I couldn't say exactly what I was wishing for. To keep August by my side, always. To undo that quick tug of jealousy I'd felt seeing the girlfriend lying next to him on the floor. But even those thoughts felt too definitive, not quite settled with the craving grinding inside my gut. I looked down at the ballooning rice and listened to the two of them, talking again, returning to the living room. I moved my lips silently as I stirred the risotto and thought about what a simple sort of magic cooking was. Casual alchemy. I looked over at the two of them and saw August doing an impression of his childhood dog. He sniffed at the air, propping himself up on his knees, pawing at the girlfriend's shoulders, her collarbone. He pushed his nose into the ticklish skin of her neck and she squealed, thrilled.

Enchantment, so present in my mountain life, found me again. I could feel its fibers inside me, as I moved my wooden spoon through the bubbling, bickering boil. I dipped my tasting fork into the skillet. The risotto was soft; red tomatoes and basil and butter soaked

into the rice. I thought I could see my own face in the ruddy dish: the wide cheeks, the wobble of skin beneath my chin. I whispered again into the simmer, grinding up rosemary and sage into my palms and sifting the spice through my fingers, a slow sprinkling of green to accompany my still nebulous wishing. Across the room the girlfriend leaned away from August until she toppled off the couch.

"Bad dog," she said and smacked him across the nose.

Two

After the wishing, I set the table and presented the risotto in a blue serving pan. I cut up mangoes and tomatoes and golden raisins for a spinach salad. August poured all of us slender glasses of red wine. We sat at the table and began eating, the girlfriend and August piling their spoons high with red rice, the soft grains of it filling their cheeks, spilling off the edges of their plates and spotting the table cloth with grease, the shine of a raisin catching between their teeth like jewels. They ate quickly and with abandon, almost as if they were compelled to swallow bite after bite after bite. Meanwhile, a thickness in my throat turned chewing into impossible labor. When I looked down at my plate, the skins of the tomatoes appeared feverish and sweaty, the rice like swollen glands. I returned to the habits of my youth, pushing my fork through the mess and piling it around the sides of my plate, miming at lifting my fork and swallowing.

I poured myself another glass of wine and August followed suit. Soon, we were all on our fourth glass.

"So tell me," the girlfriend said to me, "how did your mother meet the illustrious Mr. Glass?"

"I love this story," August said. "It's so sweet."

He put his arm across the back of my chair and I looked at him. He was doing a poor job of flirting—talking about my father and leaning his shoulder behind mine like we were a couple. Then I wondered if he was trying to make her jealous, playing with the girlfriend by using me.

"Tell the story," August said.

I told the story. My father, a pharmaceutical sales rep, made one trip to Kansas City each spring. The rest of the year he lived in the Rocky Mountains. He was a huge fan of the ballet and always attended. One April, sitting through a production of *Giselle*, he turned to the woman next to him and asked her why she looked so familiar to him. The woman was my mother, foot wrapped up in bandages, watching her understudy perform her role. My father recognized her from a production of *Coppelia* the spring before. This moment of tenderness swept my wounded mother off her feet. She loved him instantly, followed him back to the towering peaks of the west and delivered him a baby girl.

There was something a bit lonesome about the tale, but I still smiled while I told it. When I looked up, August was looking up at the ceiling and smiling as well. The girlfriend was picking at the ends of her braid and studying my eyes. She reached her hand across the table and ran her fingers through my bangs, patted the top of my bun. Her breath spiced across my cheek. She was drunk.

"I wish you'd take this down," she said. "You must have such lovely hair. I'd love to braid it. I think you'd look so pretty with a braid."

"No thanks."

"Don't you think she'd look pretty with a braid, August? A braid like mine?"

I pulled further away from her hand. I stood and lifted all three of our plates from the table and carried them into the kitchen.

"Cook shouldn't clean," August said. He tried to follow me into the kitchen.

I shook my head to show him it was fine. I watched the bubbles cover the plate and imagined that the two of them might disappear. Without food, the alcohol had hit me quickly. Still, my tolerance was far beyond the girlfriend's who, now five glasses in, turned and rushed into the bathroom. August and I froze for a second and then I heard the wet

sound of a gag. I don't know why I was the one that moved for the bathroom first. I'd like to say it was because I was worried for the girl. The truth is, though, I think I couldn't have waited out in the living room, listening to the sounds of him taking care of her.

She hadn't made it to the toilet, instead she'd purged in my sink. I pushed her hair off her forehead and settled her onto the floor, back against the cool porcelain of the tub.

"Oh, babe," I said to her, and in this moment all of my anger vanished; I could see how young she was. "Sit still."

I turned back to the sink and began running the water, pulled a rag from under the sink and scooped the undigested pieces of food from the sink to the toilet, flushing and flushing.

"Quiet," she said. "I don't want August to know I'm sick in here."

I bit my lip, said nothing. I ran the water through the sink and began scrubbing the mess down the drain. My hands felt chapped from the soap and the fibers of the rag. I thought about how another woman might gag in this moment, but for me the sensation was nothing more than a hiccup.

"Everything will be fine," I said. "He'll never know."

"I feel disgusting," she said. "Why did I eat so much?"

I thought again of my incoherent wishing, my desire over the stove. Was this what I had wished for? The furrow in her brow, her sloppy discomfort? I washed my hands and then dropped the dirty cloth in the bottom of the shower, closed the curtain over it and reminded myself to return for it later. I wetted another cloth and pressed it to her brow. Hushed her with a soothing note.

The girlfriend's back buckled and she slipped all the way onto the bathroom floor. I pushed my arms below her shoulders and knees and lifted her into my arms, carried her out

of the door to the bathroom that connected to my mother's room. I set her on top of her covers and then tugged the comforter up from the foot of the bed. Her cheeks were flushed and she looked up at me through hooded eyes. She began pulling her shorts over her hips, struggling with the button. I helped her pull the cloth down her legs and folded them at the foot of the bed. When I turned back to her she had pulled her knees to her chest, hugging them like a second body. I touched the braid in her hair. In the living room, August began singing along to an old Johnny Cash album and I smiled.

I turned from her and walked back into the living room.

"She's down for the night," I said to August. He laughed.

"I thought she might be."

"I put her in my mother's bed; she made it up for the two of you to stay in."

"That was nice of her."

"Nice." I laughed.

"Where is she?"

I explained about her thyroid, the white pill, how her body was becoming a toxic thing.

"Jesus," he said. "You Glass women sure can't seem to catch a break, can you?"

He put his hand on top of mine and rubbed just below my thumb.

"You must be exhausted," he said. "Are you ready to turn in?"

I looked down at my watch.

"It's early yet."

He handed me a cup of whiskey. He wanted to know what else had been happening in my life. I told him how I'd been helping my mother out at her studio, how, a few weeks ago, waste run-off from a nearby nuclear plant had turned sections of the Colorado River

orange. He told me that the girlfriend was teaching him to swim. He dropped to the floor beside me and spread out on his belly to show me what he'd learned last week: the breast stroke. He flinched and stood back up.

"Fuck," he said.

His nipple ring had caught on the movement and popped open, dropping out of his shirt and rolling across the floor. He chased it and caught it in his hand. He lifted his shirt over his head, pinched the earing between his finger and his thumb and attempted to press it back inside his skin. It dropped to the carpet again.

"My fingers are too big," he said. "Or I'm too drunk. Hold up your hand."

I held up my hand. Fingers like stretched, elegant legs. The tips of mine extended beyond his, but twice as thin. He put the hoop in my hands and pressed my fingers to his chest. I felt the tender pink of him give as I pushed the metal home, heard the silver tick of the clasp locking in place. Under the cold jewelry, his skin puckered and firmed. I thought, for a moment, I could feel his heart, but it was actually my own pulse, animating even the tips of my fingers.

I pulled my hand away and he smiled.

"How have I survived without you?"

"You've been fine," I said, tilting my head towards the bedroom. "Clearly."

He shook his head and shimmied down the floor. He rested his head on my stomach and I tried not to pull away; I didn't want him to feel how soft I was. He didn't seem to mind. He rolled his face to the side and pushed his nose into my hip like a dog.

"I love you," he said.

"I know," I said. "You too."

He looked down at the whiskey in his hand and sighed.

"Fuck, this was a bad idea. I'll be so hung-over tomorrow."

"It's fine," I said. "We're young."

Together we stared out the window. In the dark, we could still see the thick outline of the mountains, tinted by the moon so it looked like they'd been drawn in grey chalk. We counted the seconds. He covered the punctured skin of his nipple with his thumb and flicked the hoop with his nail. Only stillness outside. He stood from the couch and held his hand out to me.

"Let's go to bed."

I watched him trail down the hall and open the bedroom door. Imagined him walking inside and curling up next to the girl, how her hand would be waiting for him, palm up, an invitation on his sheets.

Three

I slept through my run the next morning, woke up to the girlfriend knocking on my door. She wanted to know if I knew where she and August might find a pool.

"I've been teaching him to swim," she said, smirking as if this fact gave her some possession over him. "I would hate to let his practice lapse."

I nodded and told her I would drive them to the high school pool. She left. I thought about the way she talked, how she seemed to fill her sentences with fat words to impress me. I wondered if she assumed I was stupid because I hadn't been to college like her. Well maybe I was stupid about some things, but words weren't one of them. I'd studied books on drama to learn the art of performance, put myself to sleep by reading Greek myths so I could understand the origin of those transformations that were so common in ballet. Even the sound of an orchestra started to take on a language of its own for me, the sharp angles of a body creating a pose. There's a reason they call it a "musical phrase." It was impossible for me not to notice how language, too, often contained that same elegance. Even the simplest words: milk teeth, touch paper, rumble strip.

Gothic was so small it only had one pool, attached to the high school. Everyone used it. I watched the girlfriend's brow furrow as she realized how crowded it was. She commented on how its size was slightly smaller than she was used to. Still, she lead August off to the shallow end and I tried not to be too amused watching him prepare for his lesson. Twenty-six and learning to swim for the first time. He might have gone his whole life without learning if it weren't for the girlfriend.

I sat on the bleachers and the girlfriend held August around the stomach as she taught him to kick. *White bubbles,* she said to him over and over again, *white bubbles.* By which

she meant: kick harder, make the water opaque and foam. The water surrounding August's feet stayed that same pale color of chlorine and blue-bottomed pools. Around his wide chest he wore a red flotation device, as though the girlfriend's hands and the fact that the water around them was only three feet deep would not be enough to keep him from drowning. *White bubbles,* she said again and August's calves tensed, his feet flayed the water with his flexed toes.

Then he stopped kicking and rolled out of the girlfriend's arms. The floatie around his stomach caused him to bob helplessly for a moment before he righted himself and drew to his feet. He smacked the water with his hand and I saw him cough, knew he had inhaled wrong and was trying to hide his almost-choke. The eerie lights from the pool illuminated him from below, shadowing him with strange lines and highlighting his more decorative parts: the large print tattoo of a wooden ship, the glimmer of silver from his one pierced nipple, a fat slice of scar down his forearm from where he'd shattered his elbow. The tight lines of his swim cap had dug in and now ran a deep line across his forehead, a brilliant wrinkle in his skin.

At the other end of the pool, the high school swim team was practicing their dives, boys with shaved chests and hip-divots twisting their backs as they flipped their entire bodies over and over again, entering the water with a single, still splash. Girls warmed their aching muscles in a hot tub and cheered, rated the dives. Between the divers and August, muscled women free-styled up and down the lanes with their hair pinned up in caps, waterproof iPods clipped into their ears. Where I sat, on the bleachers, I was surrounded by mothers: watching their sons on the high boards, charting their progress with their eyes and whispering to the other mothers about what their own kids could do to improve.

It was clear I did not belong among these women, watching their boys. There was pride on their faces. They did not think, for example, how foolish their boys looked with floaties around their waist, how embarrassing it was to learn such a simple skill so old. They did not have the sharp bones of judgment beneath their skin. Perhaps more importantly, these boys belonged to them, relied on them. I could not even think of the exact words to describe who August was to me. Yes, I knew him so perfectly I sometimes forgot the two of us were not family. I knew how he looked in the mornings before brushing his teeth. I knew how heartily he despised the coin-shape circle of thinness on the back of his head; how he held his hand over it when he spoke to women he met at bars. I knew, also, how regularly his mother called him on the phone, how he said her name when he answered. I knew he feared her death more than his own.

And still, despite all our intimacies, I could not watch him flailing about in the water with sympathy on my tongue. Instead I wondered if his bald patch had grown since the last time I'd seen him. I laughed each time the floatie bobbed him back into his girlfriend's arms. I resisted the urge to lean closer to one of the women sitting next to me and whisper about him: I wanted his weakness to be seen.

This was not the reunion I had wanted: watching this beautiful woman hold him in her arms while he paddled like a dog. My mother never understood my relationship with August. She insisted we were both in love with each other and too stubborn to admit it. She kept asking me what I was waiting for. When she spoke about him to me, she called him *your friend August,* and said it with a smirk, drawing the word "friend" out like a comedic bit. She was convinced that, one day, the two of us would be married. I tried to explain to her how, for me, intimacy was the opposite of desire. The longer I knew August, the less arousing even the thought of him became. It had always been this way with me; the more I knew

someone the less sexual they became. Some sort of defect inside of me that kept me from getting closer to the people who really knew me.

And yet. There were times when she described this hypothetical future to me, the merging of my love for August and my desire for another body against mine, when it might, for a second, seem real. There was something intoxicating about imagining that sort of happiness. About someone believing I could achieve it. It was hard to escape. Then, I would just as easily imagine the opposite of that, the inevitable ending, the two of us no longer lovers or friends. He was more important to me than anyone else I knew. I couldn't lose him.

Watching the girlfriend in the water, I wondered if it wasn't already too late. Even through the water I could see how thin she was, how the tops of her thighs never touched. I pulled at the skin around my neck, convinced I'd grown into a second chin. I looked down at my wrist, the bone nearly invisible. I felt tired and somehow, although I was the most clothed person in the entire pool, completely nude.

Four

After the lesson, the girlfriend announced that she wanted to take a nap. August told her he wanted to see my mother's ballet studio. She paused for a moment, conflicted, and then said she would come, too. We walked into town and she wrapped her fingers around his elbow, pulled him close to her while they walked. He shrugged her off.

"I feel like you're my grandmother," he said, "holding on to me like that."

She dropped his arm and fell behind him, rubbing her hands up and down her ribs as if she were chilled. I felt a sharp spike of sympathy for her, but pushed it down. I was anxious about showing the place to August. We'd both studied at so many state-of-the-art facilities. At ABT there were whole hallways, glass doors that would allow a visitor to see into at least three rooms at once. When I walked down these halls, my eyes always seemed to pick out August. He was the first thing I noticed in any room. My brain trained over the years to spot the wide slope of his shoulders, draped in his typical heather grey shirt, to listen for the gentle line of his voice, soft and high, as if his throat had stopped growing long before the rest of him. In sound alone, he was quite feminine: an odd western lilt in his voice that made words rise and fall in places you wouldn't quite expect. Even grown there was still something delicate about him, standing tall in the corner of a room, stretching the back of his hamstring up the barre while I watched him through the wide studio windows.

My mother's studio was simple. It was only one room, a worn old barre that ran around two of the walls. One wall entirely a mirror and another wall entirely a window. Occasionally, the screws holding the barre to the cinder brick wall would wriggle loose. Then my mother would kneel on the floor and attempt carpentry. She rolled out the long strips of

ballet mat onto the floor and taped them down herself. I wonder if she sometimes also felt ashamed of how her studio compared to the ones she remembered dancing in.

The front of her studio was tucked into the stucco front of a small strip mall. On its left, a family owned BBQ restaurant, favored for selling buckets filled with chicken and biscuits and enough sauce to soften the cardboard of the dish's bottom. On the right, Dimple Donuts, a local treasure that my mother despised. I've never understood why, she would say to me, people continue to eat at a restaurant that advertises exactly what it will do to your thighs. And between these two buildings my mother's wide windows, so that anyone passing between the stores could see clear to the back of the studio, each dancer's face, the desire to escape the blistering pain in their feet.

People often stopped to watch; this was not a town accustomed to performance. Or to slim girls in leotards lifting their legs above their heads. My mother refused to close the blinds. She said it was practice for performance and for a lifetime of being a woman. They're always looking at you like this, she said. At least here there's a glass between you. So the girls sweated through their summer performances, dreaming of the winter, when the humidity of their own bodies would fog the cold window and obscure them to the world outside.

When I brought August and the girlfriend into the studio, they noticed the window first. The girlfriend commented on the gorgeous view. The studio was already filled with my mother's dancers, stretching in their legwarmers. They looked at the two newcomers with curiosity, but I refused to introduce them, just gestured them over to the viewing couch my mother had positioned at the top of the room. These girls were not my friends; there was no reason to explain August to them.

I clapped my hands to call the girls to attention and they all gathered around me. Lydia stepped forward, so that she was standing closer to me than any of the others. She was

the daughter of The Fox Lady and my mother's current star. Lydia was beautiful. Her face was so slender I could see the entire line of her cheekbone. When she smiled a small dimple appeared. The dimple seemed impossible on such an angled face. The rest of her body was just as defined; even as she stood perfectly still, pieces of her seemed to flex. The muscle of her thigh split into two triangles and her calves were as tight as clenched fists. She had all the pieces of a dancer's body. Already I could see her lifting easily up into a man's hands, I could imagine her head leaning back onto his shoulder as they *pas de deux*-ed.

Her balletic shape stood out in the studio, full of high school girls with soft stomachs, love handles, brand new breasts that they hadn't yet learned how to contain. I noticed how August picked Lydia out instantly. He sat up straighter and trailed his eyes up her body from her ankles to her collarbone. I thought Lydia would notice his attention. I thought she'd be flattered. But she only looked at him once, dismissively, and then turned back to look at me with rapt attention.

"Rose," she said, "I've been having so much trouble with my *piqué* turns. Your mother told me you could help me. "

"Of course," I said.

"Show me one?" She asked.

Once upon a time, I was famous for my triple *pirouettes,* my mid-air rotations. But I hadn't danced since the surgery. I would not perform a turn for her. Instead, I walked behind Lydia, boxing my hands around her hips like a male dancer would. I patted the side of her ribs and asked her to *relevé*. I pushed her hips just slightly forward and then backed away from her.

"Try again," I said.

She rose up on her toes and spun, this time twice. I could see, in the quivering of her torso, how unsteady she was, still unpracticed in stability. As she turned, her thigh quivered twice and her pointed toes slipped down her knee; it was a miracle she didn't knock herself off-center.

August watched her with his lips pursed. I knew he'd noticed the same flaws I had. He leaned back to study Lydia and in doing so knocked my mother's plastic parrot off its perch. The mechanical bird clattered to the ground.

The bird was one of my mothers many eccentricities. She'd bought it years ago, before I was even born, at a bargain bin toy store. She used it to taunt her students when she was feeling especially cruel. The bird had a small recorder inside its belly and could play back up to twenty words. Each week, she recorded a new catch phrase into its beak and chased her dancers around the studio, pressing replay. Your foot is sickled! the bird would shout. Don't you know the difference between your left foot and your right? Your ass is flabby and you will never own a corvette! At the end of each exclamation, the bird was programed to squawk, adding insult to the injury.

In the bird's early days, she used it most often on me, wanted to be sure everyone knew I wasn't getting special treatment because I was her daughter. Sometimes she would stand in front of me at the barre with the bird in her hand, squawking, and I would have to go through the entire rehearsal with it's red chest and plastic blue feathers touching my face. Not good enough, the bird said that day. Not good enough.

I'd seen my mother wielding the bird with her current crop of girls. They flinched each time she lifted it from its perch on the piano. But now the bird was dead, small head severed from its shoulders by the collision with the floor. August had killed it. He looked up, horrified, but the girls in the studio cheered. I smiled at him.

"You're their hero," I said.

August stood and bowed. The girls blushed. I let them stare at him for a minute more before clapping my hands again. It was time to start rehearsal. I called for the four *petite cygnets* and they walked towards me with clasped hands. I moved to the tape deck and skipped it forward a few measures, called out the "big swans" to practice their *pirouette en arabesques*. None of them looked quite stable. I adjust one of their arms and then ordered them to turn again. I was always anxious leading rehearsal, so aware of how soft my body looked compared to someone like Lydia. I kept waiting for one of the girls to question my ability to teach them. But none of them ever did. They listened with rapt attention while I reminded them not to adjust their feet while they were trying to balance *en pointe*. Think of a tree, I said to them, does it adjust its roots when it's knocked about by the wind?

I took them through the choreography of the second act of *Swan Lake*, the triumphant music swelling as Prince Siegfried and Odette fell in love. I watched these simple girls dancing. They were all so young—none older than nineteen. None of them dreamed of becoming famous ballerinas and, even if they did, there was no chance any of them could become stars, would ever see even a scrap of the success that August and I had. Not even Lydia.

I'd always loved the second act of Swan Lake, when the prince finally meets Odette and her lake of swan maidens. He's not looking to fall in love; he's going hunting. All morning, village girls have *pas de basque-ed* and *jeté-ed* around him, and now that the moon is rising and a swan is stepping out of the water, turning into a girl, he realizes the problem with all of his suitors: they were not birds. How silly, he says to himself, how could I not have known this before? I can only love girls that also have wings. You have to believe

there's something spectacular about a man like that. It's like Nureyev said, *the prince was exceptional man. It does not happen just to everyone to see there are swans.*

Odette is much more skeptical; he's holding a crossbow. Swan-girls never trust a hunter. But he finally calms her and she tells him everything about the curse, how she and her handmaidens are forced to live every day as swans until a man, who has never loved another, proclaims his undying love for her. He says he'll make the oath. He'll make the oath today! Oh, but he loves her.

In the ballet, this part always comes across as a little silly, because it's pantomimed. Odette crosses her arms down her chest to show how she is bound and the prince raises his whole first in the air, shakes it to show how he'll defeat the evil sorcerer, Rothbart. And every few seconds the sorcerer himself, dressed as a bird of prey, darts across the stage from the wings. But then the swans, dozens of them, *arabesque penche* in from the sides and save them, surround them with their pale tutus and their perfect, upside down J points, *bourre-ing* around the stage while the prince lifts Odette into his arms. Everything is beautiful again. Charming. We can forget about the silly charades, the old man dressed in tights and flamboyant feathers flapping away in the wings, the fact that girls cannot actually become swans.

When a professional corps performs this scene, it's like understanding the purpose of ballet. Their perfect and synchronized wings. But I could find something intoxicating even in the performance of these imperfect girls, the way they flitted across the stage, lifting their shoulders to pantomime wings. I stood before them and ruffled my shoulders, showed them how to tilt their head at a sharp angle.

The first time I danced Swan Lake with August, I entered half-hidden by a screen that was designed to look like the surface of a pond. I showed nothing but the neat point of

my calves, the arch of my arms, the white frill of my tutu imitating a swan's behind. I looked like I was truly swimming. For weeks, August watched me glide across this black water in my white mesh, and in the dressing rooms he told the other dancers he'd never seen a more beautiful sight. He repeated to them what Nureyev reportedly said to Fonteyn the first time he saw her dance: that he would follow her to the end of the world. When I walked off the lake, I rubbed my chin against both my shoulders, fidgeted like I was picking at the down of the wing. It always seemed to me that ballet was invented exactly for this role: the lifted arms, the quick beats of legs, women trying to take flight. And as I reprised the role in my mother's studio, I remembered what it used to be like to be linked so wholly to August, to feel like we were one body, with one goal.

I finished with the swans and sent them out to get water. Lydia had to stay. It was time for us to rehearse her solo. In a professional performance, of course, it would have been a *pas de deux,* but my mother had choreographed it into a solo for her. I watched her perform the steps that had been mine for so many years, watched her perfect body—the sharp angles of her extensions, the gorgeous line of her leg. Her foot was as slender as her legs. The swans returned from their water break and sat cross-legged in front of Lydia on the floor. They watched her perform her *forte* turns. They applauded.

After rehearsal, the mothers flooded in. The girls were all still in high school; they needed a mother to drive them home. I recognized in these mothers the familiar crossed arms, how some of them touched their daughters on the cheek and patted the bloated skin, peered into their eyes. The girls curtseyed to me before they left the floor.

"Why do you look so startled?" August said. "You're a great teacher."

"I know," I said. I didn't know this. I thought I looked foolish trying to lead these girls through my mother's choreography. A fat girl pantomiming at grace.

After I locked up the studio, the girlfriend said she was going to walk home and take a nap. She motioned with her eyes that August should join her. Instead, he asked if I would show him the town. She pulled him by the elbow and they whispered, back and forth, her voice rising higher than his ever did. Finally, she turned and walked away.

"It's just the two of us," he said.

Finally. I lead him through the streets and showed him the litter of bottles and paper bags left over from the celebration of the equinox. August asked if we could attend the last night of the festival: the burning of The Grump.

"Of course," I said. "If you're still here."

"I'll still be here."

I turned away so he wouldn't see me smile.

He kept forgetting to look where he was walking. His gaze was turned up at the sky, the gold of the aspens contrasting with it perfectly. He said a day like this could make you understand the phrase "electric blue." He couldn't believe it looked like this every day. I reminded him that it was just the color of fall. I had a thought, as I was saying that, about the legend of the seasons, how it was Demeter's grief at the loss of her daughter that caused the weather to cool. I wondered if there were any other mothers in the world that loved their daughters that much.

I took August out for food. As we stood in line, I studied the body of the girl next to me. Her legs were as thin as my arms; I was certain that two of her could fit inside of me. We ordered burritos and he tucked into his hurriedly. I'd always been jealous of the way he ate. He didn't need to stay small enough for a man to lift; he had to stay strong enough to lift an entire woman in the palm of his hand. I picked up my knife and sliced my burrito down

the middle. I cut at the open ends of either side of it. August finished his meal and looked up at me. I pushed my plate towards him.

"Take mine," I said. "I'm finished."

"You've barely touched it."

"Take it," I said. "If I eat anymore I'll just make myself throw it up later anyway."

"I thought you were getting better," August said. "You look better."

I shrugged and pushed the plate towards him. He paused for a moment before driving his fork into a piece of beef.

After we ate I took him to happy hour at the El Dorado Saloon; I wanted to keep him to myself just a little longer. Then we wandered up and down the streets.

"There are so many art galleries," August said. "How can there be so many art galleries in a town this size?"

"Tourists," I said. "They'll buy anything."

We ducked into one gallery, and the paintings were wretched: simple, gold canvases of wheat with wide blue skies. In every room a different season. Different iterations of the same life. All poorly painted and overly slick with oil.

"Hello." It was Lydia.

"Do you work here?"

"I do," she said. "It's one of my many jobs."

I knew she was saving money to move out of her mother's house; it couldn't be fun to live surrounded by all those foxes.

"Lydia," I said. "This is my old ballet partner, August."

"Hello," August said. "Horrible art, by the way."

For a second I paused, certain he'd offended her. Instead, she laughed.

"I know," she said. "I can't believe it's my job to protect this crap."

"How much protection does art even need?" I said.

"I'll show you," Lydia said. "Why don't you touch one of those masterpieces?"

I reached my hand forward, rested four of my fingers on the oil so they perfectly covered up the line in the highway, two small rolls of hay, the low sun. I held my hand there. Lydia watched me.

"Well," I said. "What are you going to do to me now?"

"I'm going to have to restrain you."

She took a step towards me, but at that moment another customer entered the gallery. August and I excused ourselves into the next room and he nudged my shoulder.

"She was definitely flirting with you," he said.

"I know."

He started to say something else and then he paused. He slapped me on the back.

"You've already slept with her," he said. "Haven't you?"

I nodded.

I know there's this idea of ballerinas being proper and prim, but it's really not the case. Imagine growing up surrounded by gorgeous bodies, people that make a living off of being beautiful. When I was thirteen, I got to dance in the corps for Swan Lake in the Kansas City Metro Ballet. Between the third and fourth acts, Odile and Rothbart raced off the stage and stripped totally naked behind the rosin box. This was how most quick changes happened in the professional ballet, but I didn't know this. I was fascinated. Everyone kept hurrying about, preparing for the next scene, and I stood still and watched their bodies. They shucked their tutus and tunic in tandem, stood waiting for the woman behind them to button on their next ensemble in nothing but the thin mesh of their tights.

I guess I could have turned away, but I didn't. I studied the shallow points of her breasts, the tight, hard lift of her nipples. Through the pink tights, I could see her crotch, how it was no different from my own: hairless and bare. Beside her, the man stepped out of his tights: he would have to wear a skintight black bodysuit for the next scene. I don't think I even noticed his cock. I was distracted by the sturdy lines of his thighs; how the muscles were so sharp they produced literal dips in his skin. The assistant started wrestling him into his suit while beside him the woman pulled her second costume on, looked around and spotted me. I thought she would yell. Instead, she walked towards me, backing into my hands.

"Can you button me?" she asked.

I tucked each button into place and the two of them raced back onto the stage. As I watched the two of them through the final act, as I balanced beside them on my toes, I couldn't help but think of the skin beneath their outfits, how crafted and architectured each moment of their bodies had been. I thought that if I only I could have a body like that, I wouldn't feel the sharp pulses of jealousy that were so constant beneath my skin. And years later I would look just like this woman, would shed my own clothes easily off stage, let eyes fall on me, call boys and girls beside me after a performance and let them touch me beneath my tights. But I would never undress without that initial hesitation, would never look at a body without first feeling a quick rush of envy.

Even in high school, I never slept with anyone more than once. I could hardly stand to look at someone after they'd seen me naked. And it wasn't just the boys. When I was sixteen, my old roommate backed me up against a set dressing from *Firebird* and pushed her fingers under my tights. Pay attention, she told me, it'll be your turn next. Pleasure, I think, is easier to give than to receive. Especially if you don't like to be looked at.

At night August and I would creep up to the roof of the dormitory and lie on our backs looking up at the impossible stars. We never turned our heads towards each other while we talked. I would detail to him how the girl had touched me, what it felt like to put my mouth on her, and he would admit that he sometimes thought about these stories alone in his room while his roommate slept. I felt so powerful then, knowing how I could flush him.

I could see it was a power I still had. He looked back at Lydia and blushed, giggled like he was young. I rolled my eyes at him and pulled him into the next room. There were only a few paintings in here, but dozens of boxes rested against the wall, unsold paintings from dozens of shows before. More stacked in the center of the room, not even boxed, just loosely covered in butcher paper. I could see their corners poking out like pale skin. The floor was lousy with them.

"This is just like life," I said.

"What?"

"You fill your whole life up with projects, work, like those stupid hay bale portraits back there. Room after room of them, your whole life, and then one day you realize how useless they all were, how no one actually enjoyed looking at them but you and now there's just a room of paintings wrapped in butcher paper."

I walked between the boxes, pulling back their covers, searching. I wondered if he knew what I was thinking about, how my own life had filled up that way: lists of French terms and ballet lifts crowding out all other thoughts. Me dressed up like birds and fainting women. August in jeweled tunics and tights, lifting me into the air. I could fill whole rooms with all the wasted choreography I'd learned over the years. For a moment it felt like I was standing in a gallery of my own dumb desires.

"Do you know," August asked, "the theory about parallel universes?"

He explained. Scientists theorized there were thousands upon thousands of alternate universes surrounding us, that for each choice we made a separate universe split off where each decision played out. So, there was a universe where I'd never danced at all. A universe where I never left the west. Where August and I became corps dancers on different coasts. The air was ripe with possibilities.

August lifted a painting off its stack and ripped the butcher paper off the front. The canvas was jewel grey, perfect slate except for one splash of yellow in the center of it: a neon, misshapen canary. He touched the crescent of her nail to the oil and scraped off a small corner, then a large oval. He looked down at the rolls of grey beneath his nail.

"I like to think," he said, "that whatever might be different in those other worlds, the two of us always find each other."

I couldn't help it. I laughed at him.

Five

After the gallery, I told August I needed to go back to the studio and alter a few costumes. He said he would follow me. I asked if his girlfriend wouldn't be missing him and he said that she'd left for Utah a few hours earlier. When I looked surprised, he reminded me that the two of them weren't moving together. I understood, finally, what they must have been fighting about outside of the studio.

"Plus," he said. "She has orientation for her new job tomorrow."

"You could have gone, too," I said. "If you wanted."

"I didn't."

While I stitched sequins onto the bodices of the swan tutus, August paced out the studio. He took off his shoes and began practicing his *tour jetés* and *saut de basques*. I watched how he split his legs and seemed to pause in the air. He *pliéd* and sprung into the air. His athletic thighs carving geometric patterns into his skin. The shapes the two of us were expected to make were so different: he was meant to have power, height, bulk. I was meant to rise up on my toe and balance like a thin line. He stopped and walked over in front of me, chest heaving.

"Come dance with me," he said.

I shook my head. Instead, I took him outside to show him the festivities. Girls were sashaying down the street, carrying The Grump above their heads. Behind them, men on stilts carried giant torches, lit. In the distance, we could see the stand where they would set The Grump before they pushed their flames inside his chest. I imagined how it would look: wood two stories high, sparking into the dark. In tandem with the bonfire, they'd set up a

small stage under a white tent. No one in the band was under the age of sixty. In front of the amplified guitars, middle-aged divorcees danced in cut-off denim shorts.

The band began to play. They were grey-haired and eager, the woman playing the bass guitar thrumming and hopping in place. I wondered if I'd ever held that much energy off a stage. Off stage, old men in cut-off shorts bounced from divorced woman to divorced woman, dipping them, cradling their open palms. They were dressed just like me: cut-off shorts, small shirts, summer smoothness on their legs. It seemed for a minute that there was no age gap between us, that nothing would change as I grew and time filed my bones down. August and I sat together and watched them. He was careful to sit close enough that our shoulders touched. In the grass the singles kicked off their shoes, settled into more permanent pairings, women pressing their fingers to the slightly stubble-roughed faces of the men that held them.

I spotted Lydia, not too far away. She was sitting on the grass alone, talking into her cellphone. I could guess from her pursed lips that she was talking with her mother. She ended the call just in time to be discovered by some of her friends. They lifted Lydia up by her arms and pulled her into their circle. They began to spin. Some of them had their wrists knotted together with hemp. Others were topless, shouting sibilant praise to the Earth Mother. They danced. I was not too much older than them, but twenty-six felt like an infinity of time between myself and their teenage revelry. Every so often, Lydia turned back towards me, and then her dancing would slow. She wanted to perform for me, wanted me to watch her.

A man began walking towards us. I could see his eyes were open, but when he was a few feet away he closed his eyes and started pushing a walking stick against the ground. He slowed his pace and waved his hand in the air like he was blind. He stopped right in front of

me and kneeled on the ground, put his fingers on my shoulder. He dragged his hand lower, towards my breast.

"Hello," he said. "Can you help me?"

August pushed him away from me, told him to back off. The man opened his eyes and laughed. He stood up and tried the same trick on another girl a few feet away from us.

"You didn't have to do that," I said to August. "I can take care of myself."

He'd set his hand on my knee, thumb rubbing smooth patterns over the joint. I stood up and walked away from him, and his hand remained cupped in the exact shape of my leg for a few seconds more. Then he stood up and followed me out into the night.

Six

In the morning, when I returned from my run, August was sitting at the kitchen table eating bacon and drinking coffee. He was wearing a pair of blue cotton shorts my mother had bought for me when I was thirteen. They were stretched to their limit by his muscled thighs, so short they barely hid the important bits. He was also wearing one of my old tank tops. When he saw me staring, he shrugged and ripped off a chunk of bacon with his teeth.

"I needed to do laundry," he said.

He wanted me to take him up in to the mountains and I agreed, asked him if he wouldn't like for me to try to find him some more suitable clothes. I said my mother might still have some of my father's old clothes lying around. He said he liked my clothes just fine. When he turned to walk into the bathroom I saw the word "juicy" spelled out in rhinestones across his ass.

I decided I'd better take us to one of the less traveled hikes.

As we drove up into the morning, I gave August the map. He directed me while I steered. This was a pattern we were practiced in. I rolled down the windows so we could breathe in the smell, the damp country asphalt letting in the old musk of rain. August had always loved the Blue Ridge Mountains and he loved their western cousins even more. The higher we drove into the Rockies, the more I saw him smile. He rested his head on the lowered windowpane and the breeze moved like fingers through his dark hair.

Of course I was in love with him. Don't be so naïve as to assume the trouble was as simple as me not recognizing my own feelings. The trouble was that I didn't believe he could actually feel affection for me. I couldn't understand it. There was no part of me that I could imagine him being attracted to. I had such a long list of flaws. I could hardly admit them to

myself. Tell me how you accept that you were so fixated on starving yourself that you couldn't even notice an ovary splitting inside your own skin. Tell me how you accept that you're barren at twenty-six, that you'll probably never menstruate again without the pill. I always was jealous of those girls in school, the ones with the wild cycles that synced up with the other girls in our dorm. Oh, to belong to anyone that way.

The closest I came to belonging to anyone was with August. I was once as familiar with his body as I was with my own. I could still imagine the two of us on the stage, the years we spent together. The catch of his calluses steadying my hips as I spun. During one performance, my breast slid free of my bodice, the nipple pointing directly into the crowd. August lifted it up in his hand and tucked it away before the next beat.

We reached the trailhead. August and his juicy ass leapt out of the car and stretched. He lifted his nose to the sky and breathed in deep.

"Mountain air," he said. "Nothing like it."

"Let's go explore," I said to him, and we began to pace up the trail. I tried to keep my eyes away from the shine of his butt. There was a small farm at the bottom of the mountain, barely visible from where we stood. We could see the grey horses standing in pairs of two. I knew that they stood like that, face to butt, so they could whisk flies out of each other's eyes.

We kept walking. We reached a trail opening that climbed at a steep, almost ninety-degree angle, dotted on either side with rocks. The only moments of traction were the wide roots that grew into the path. We both moved quickly, but August broke free of the ascent first, up onto a flat, crested ridge. I wasn't far behind. Somewhere in the distance I heard rifle fire. I caught up to August on the hill and he slowed his steps so we fell into time. His mother was an amateur botanist, so he could tell a blue spruce from a bristlecone pine by the

ridges of its bark. We paused beside a narrowleaf cottonwood and he rubbed his fingers into the gaps of its furrows to show me its patterning. He lifted up a fallen leaf the size of my head and propped it into my hair like a crown. He flourished one of his wrists in a circle and bowed to me.

"Your highness," he said, theatrical lilt in his tone, "might I release you from your great burden?"

He motioned towards my purse, which I handed over to him. With the purse in his arms and the rhinestones on his rump he looked quite delicate. He held it for a few moments as we walked on, then he handed it back.

"It's too pink," he said.

"I didn't ask you to hold it."

We kept walking. The trees returned and August continued to identify them (Engelmann spruce, quaking aspen, limber pine, white fir). We approached the peak. The September sky began to cloud, appearing fuzzed like a broken television. August sat down on the flat surface on a rock and motioned for me to sit next to him. We looked over the landscape, hundreds of miles spread open before us, the line of the highway far below us, bisecting everything like a black scar, houses lined up on either side of it in perfect geometry.

Our legs dangled over the summit and kicked in parallel beats and I realized something that I should have realized years ago: that one day August and I would live separate lives. One day, he might hike up this hill with his wife and sit beside her on this same rock and point at the small, marigold-sized houses while the light cut faces into the rock around them and August named the trees that were shading her with their palms. I breathed in this realization, tried to accept it. In all the time I'd known him, he'd never dated

anyone seriously. Daddy issues, he claimed, and he'd never said more on the matter. Still, one day even that would fade and he would settle down.

"I had the strangest dream last night," he said.

"Please don't," I said. "No one is ever interested in anyone else's dreams."

"What if I told you that you were in this dream?"

"Okay," I said. "I could be interested in that."

He told me that he'd dreamed about my death. It wasn't the first time it had happened, he said. He'd been having these dreams for months. Sometimes, it was simple: I stepped off the curb too quickly, the brakes went out in my car, or I sunk into wrinkles and life ended for me the natural way. Other times it was more fantastical: I was waiting for him in the terminal of an airport and a sinkhole opened up beneath my feet. Or I was devoured by a pack of wolves. I choked while eating boiled pears. Once, I went up in a hot air balloon and the basket tethers snapped. His mother came to him and told me I was dead, but could never prove it, never showed him the body.

In the last dream he had, I was walking away from him and he told me to wait, told me to listen, but I didn't and, without even the sense of a third body in the scene, a bullet entered my chest. I was bleeding out at his knees. That dream had been the worst because it hadn't ended there. Time sped forward and he'd been forced to dream of his grief for me, how eventually everyone expected him to forget about me and carry on with his life. It had felt so real, he said, that he'd walked around for most of that morning still believing I was dead.

"How did I die last night?"

"You swallowed a chicken bone," he said. "You died coughing up blood."

He pushed his hand through my hair. I could smell the dark spice of his deodorant, the smell of his sweat mixing with the detergent still trapped in my clothes. His thumb ran up the shell of my ear and I pressed my nose to his forearm, felt his soft hair on my skin. I breathed in deep; I didn't want to forget. He slipped his hand to the back of my neck and tried to pull me to him, but I shrugged out of his grip.

"Okay," he said. "That's fine."

"August—

"I just needed to know," he said. "I had to try once, didn't I?

He nodded and stood. He started walking back down the hill.

Seven

The mountain curved beneath our feet like the dark spine of an eel. August chewed on the skin inside his cheek, which was what he did when he was thinking about difficult things. He reached out his hand and took my purse back. Up here, the trees thinned and were replaced by these odd, verdant flowers lining the path. They looked like long-stemmed peonies, but with an eerie green complexion. I'd never seen anything like them before. The stems, the necks of them, were thin and wavering. Many of them hadn't bloomed, and the ones that had were cellophane-skinned, veiny and glowing. August held the corner of my purse in both hands and lopped off the head of one peony. Then another.

"What are you doing?" I said.

He walked faster. He took out three with one swing. I stood still and watched him skip-step and swing, decapitated blossoms following in his wake. He reached a curve in the trail and handed the bag back to me.

"No," I said. "You're committed to it now."

He shrugged and looped the long shoulder strap of it over both of our necks. He linked his elbow into mine and I could feel our sweat rubbing together. We walked with our elbows joined the way a grandson holds his grandmother to help her cross the street. Like two noosed and tottering old ladies, we sweated up the crooked trail.

"You're upset about something," I said. "Are you upset at me?"

He said nothing. I could feel how badly I wanted him to respond to me, to finally admit me into his mind. I wondered if he was thinking about the girlfriend and wishing he'd left with her.

August began slapping the trees as he passed them; his dark palms kept catching on the ridges of the bark and bits of the skin scraped away. He was the kind of man who callused, who bled often. I wanted to catch his hands in mine and stop him.

August let go of my arm, stopped, and plucked a fistful of the odd, irradiated peonies. He said they were for my mother, but didn't say anything more. Now, he walked ahead of me. Each time I quickened my pace to match his he would speed up. We walked past a lake and August paused.

"Let's go swimming," he said.

"You don't know how to swim."

"I know a little," he said. "I'm going."

He walked towards the lake, pulling his shirt over his head.

The color of the lake was nothing like the chlorinated blue of the pool I'd watched August practicing in the day before. I could see the dim tone of this water. It was gaseous and grey, still as slate and just as cold, even in the September heat. I dipped my finger into it and shivered, pulled back.

The lake was narrow and stretched almost three miles in a thin line. It was an ambitious challenge for a novice swimmer, but I knew the water was never deeper than eight feet, even at its center point. Around the lake, dry summer brambles and unopened seeds that had fallen from nearby trees. The ground was baked hard by the summer except for the points closest to the water, where wetness literally lapped.

August walked ahead of me and stretched his arms. He stripped out of my juicy shorts and was wearing only his boxers. I studied, again, the clumsy black outline of the ship against his chest. He'd gotten it years before he was old enough for a tattoo, sixteen, in honor of the "broader horizons" he hoped to reach. When he looked at it now he found it

humbling, shameful. Everything we find clever will one day humiliate us. His chest was hairless, but rashed in such a way that I knew he'd shaved the follicles away. No one wanted to see chest hair peeking out of a man's leotard.

He walked to the end of the lake and I watched as he flinched against the brambles in his bare feet. He didn't dive into the water, but walked deliberately into the still tide. The sun was beginning to dip behind him and it cast its light on the hairs of his legs. They looked burnished and gold. As he stepped into the water, the hair darkened and stuck to his thighs. He kept walking, even as the water rose up to his neck and it seemed, for a moment, he might not have to swim at all, but instead wade his way from point to point. Then, his chin dipped under for a second and I saw his arms startle to the surface, paddling. He dipped his head under and pulled his arms in a circle. A delicate, bobbing breaststroke.

I didn't follow him. I sat down of the damp ground of the bank and watched. I couldn't understand why he was so upset with me for turning away from him; he was the one with a girlfriend. I didn't want to be added to his list of forgotten girls—a kiss was hardly a declaration of love. But still: I didn't want him to leave me. In the space of a few days, I'd forgotten all over again how to live without him. I tipped my chin up. The light was gone and the first few stars had begun to appear. It was easy to forget, sometimes, that even things that appeared as facts had not always been facts. For example, the constellations—Cassiopeia, Orion's Belt, The Seven Sisters—were created by men, were drawn line by line on a map. Invented so we would have an easier way to chart the skies, to memorize them. There was a point in time when none of them had names. They were just dense balls high above us in the night, as indistinguishable as everything else. And then the next day they were pieces of a list. We became reliant on them to navigate. Soon, we could

not imagine being unable to name them. It was the same way with relationships. A person was a stranger to you one moment and then the next—

August shouted my name. I looked up and saw him floundering. Then his head vanished beneath the water for two seconds, three, burst to the top again with a flail of his arm, and his hand smacked against the water as if it might gain purchase. I sprinted towards him, crashed into the grey water. August was moving towards me now, quick free-style strokes that stuttered into doggy paddle. No more of his casual breaststroke. He shouted my name.

"Something bit me," he said.

I kept moving towards him. I could hear him choking, how panic had interrupted his breathing and jittered adrenaline into his limbs, throwing off his strokes. For each rise he made above the water he sank deeper.

"Rosalind," he said again, and now I was close enough to grab him.

I wish I could say something simple here. I wish I could say that he went limp in my arms and I suddenly realized the strength of my body as I lifted him to shore. I wish I could tell you how easy it was to hold him to me with my muscled arms, the power in my thighs. Or I could deliver a poetical musing on my weightlessness in the water, his hollow-seeming form. How we floated and floated like so much foam.

But he didn't come easily to me. He kept struggling; the fear gripped him so hard. August kicked up white bubbles. He bruised my shins. Still, I was pulling him towards the shore. I was saving him. It took such an effort that I forgot the water was helping me lift. When we reached a depth were I could stand I was suddenly startled by the density of him in the air. It pulled me to my knees.

"August," I said. "Stand up."

But he couldn't. I laid him on his back, like the girlfriend had the morning before, and pulled him by his arms through the shallow muck. His eyes wide and unseeing. He floated for a moment; his head bumping against the shore, dazed.

"August," I said again. "Stand up."

This time he did. We were all alone in the woods. It was up to me to lean August on my body, to start to shuffle him back towards the car. I left his clothes behind. His boxers stuck to his skin and dripped down his thighs while we hurried up the path with our arms wrapped around each other, August's wet shoulders soaking into my shirt. He was wheezing now, breaths like something pulled from the deep pit of a hole. He collapsed to the ground.

"Hold on," he said. "I can't breathe."

"Okay."

His face looked slack, damp at the corners of his mouth. His temples jeweled with sweat. My whole skeleton locked up for a second. For a moment, he seemed to come back to himself a bit, although his forehead was still hot beneath my palm. I kept one hand on him as if I could lower his temperature by will. His breathing began to slow, no longer like he was sprinting, and I could tell he was feeling more lucid. He began to pull away from me, pushed my hand away from his face.

"I'm fine," he said, leaning even further away from me. "I thought something bit me but…I think I just got scared."

"You're not fine," I said.

I put my hand on his forehead. The skin was clammy with lake water and sweat. Could I have somehow caused this: his fear and need? Had I set this whole chain of events into motion with my shapeless wishing? I had wanted him to need me and now here he was, his whole weight sinking into mine. I put my hand on his leg, felt out the damp skin from

hip to toe looking for a puncture wound. Then I repeated the check on his other side. Nothing. Just his own fear.

"You're fine," I said.

"No. Something bit me," he said again, certain now.

Eight

Somehow, the nuclear flowers survived the entire ordeal. August held them in his hand while I drove him home. Once I'd finally convinced him he wasn't poisoned, August found the whole scene rather funny. I didn't. I kept seeing the panic on his face repeated back to me. He'd been so sure he was about to die. Even remembering this, I can see the clenched fear of his mouth so clearly. I can remember how quick his was to laugh off his fear, how he smiled as we drove back towards my mother's house.

Inside, he hung the flowers, one by one, by pinning them to my ceiling beams so that the stems were above the blossoms.

"That's an interesting way to display them," I said.

"I'm not displaying them," he said. "That's how you dry out a flower."

I turned away from him and touched another flower. The veins within the petals felt raised and rough. They looked sick. He was still watching me. We sat out on the porch and I piled blankets on top of him until he pushed me away. The lights of my neighbors' houses blushed across his face. He was alive.

I watched his hands. Considered their short calluses. So many of them, I knew, had come from years of balancing his hands against my own hips, steadying me as I turned, gripping my sides and lifting me into the air. Literal marks of me on his skin. August looked up and saw me watching him, reached his hand toward me. It fell short of my shoulder and tangled in my hair, which he looped between his forefinger and thumb, drawing me closer to him by my edges.

"I'm going to make dinner," I said, pulling away from him again.

I cooked him dinner: baked chicken with vegetables. I pulled sweet potatoes and green beans out of the fresher. I ripped the veins out of the center of the beans, cracking the small, pointed tips on their ends and discarding them into the sink. I tossed them into a pot and began to boil the water. Then, I skinned the potatoes, dark shells sliding off them and revealing the orange body beneath. I pulled a blade through the circle of the potato, over and over again, as thin as I could. I dropped the potatoes onto a pan and began sprinkling them with oil, a few pinches of truffle salt. The beans were boiling and I lifted them from their heat and drained them in the sink, tossing them beside the potatoes so they would all get seasoned the same and roasted. I slid the dish into the oven and set the timer.

The water frothed. I thought about my slender mother, miles away. I wondered if she was hurting, if she could feel it as her body digested bits of itself. The timer dinged and I pulled the potatoes from the oven, dished the vegetables onto two plates. I watched August eat his fill and pushed my own food to the edges of my plate. After dinner, we sat together on the porch and drank wine and spoke about things that didn't matter: men and women we used to dance with, funny stories we both remembered from our teenage years. It was warm outside, but every time I looked at him I could detect the hint of a shiver.

When we walked back inside to go to bed, August surprised me by following me into my own room.

"I'm still a little shaken up," he said. "Can I stay with you tonight?"

I didn't laugh at him this time. I trailed behind him down the hall, leaned against the door for a second. He didn't turn on any lights; the curtains were open and even in the dark the sky semi-lit the room. Beside the bed, August had already begun to undress. He had a beautiful, shameless attitude about his own body. The moon tinged him blue and then white as he pulled off his jeans, unbuttoned his collared shirt. He shucked it from his shoulders

and the buttons clicked together as it fell to the floor. I unhooked my bra, pulled it out of my shirt, and climbed into the bed fully clothed. Under the covers, I unbuttoned my pants and tossed them to the floor.

I pushed my face into my pillow and feigned exhaustion, pretended not to see August's enviable body walking away from the foot of my bed to the bathroom and back. When he crawled into bed he flipped the covers down dramatically, and I could see both of our legs—mine pale and his dark—our white underpants, the perfect spheres of our ankles. I rolled away from him and felt the softer edges of my thigh rub against each other.

"Can I ask you something?" he said. Just the question sounded too intimate in the dark.

"Yes."

"Will you show me your scar?"

I pushed the sheets down to my knees, lifted my shirt and pushed at my underwear until he could see the long slice that started just beside my right hip. In the daylight, I knew it still looked purple and rough, ragged at the edges. In this light, though, the color was washed out, so he could only see the depth of it, its neat and surgical precision. He touched it with his broad thumb and I shivered, but held perfectly still. He pulled the finger back.

"Did that hurt?"

I nodded. The surgery had happened so long ago; I was sure the wound shouldn't still be so tender. I was beginning to wonder if I would ever heal.

"Sorry," August said, and though he meant the touch, I couldn't help but hear it as something more.

I felt his breath begin to slow. His head dipped to rest on my arm. His dark hair was short, and scratched against my skin like grass. I could see, again, that dime shaped patch of

bare skull. Maybe it was strange, but in that moment the bald spot was my favorite part of him. Something imperfect, like a scar, the pale pink of his scalp. I thought of how I would spot him worrying at it during the day, covering the back of his head with his entire hand. I wanted to pull his hand away. I wanted to tell him how tender this one piece of him seemed to me.

I was thinking about his charming theory of possibilities. Were there other worlds where I was more like those wild girls I'd watched in town all weekend, flinging their limbs into the air, heedless of how their bodies looked? Were there worlds where I'd never danced at all? Worlds where August and I never met?

I couldn't imagine a world like that. I wanted to pull us back in time, to remember how connected we used to be. I knew what I needed to do. I sat up in the bed and he mirrored me. I slipped to the floor and dug around under my bed, pulled out an old pair of tights and a leotard. Already, I could tell they would be too small, but I steadily began to work the pink tights up my legs. They ripped. August watched, silent. I reached for another pair.

"Wait," he said. "Before you put those on."

He held up a roll of athletic tape and gestured at my ankle. He taped up the joint, then reached up to my left knee and taped it up as well. He'd remembered my weak spots: the tendinitis in my Achilles and the strain of my metatarsal. Of course I should have known he'd been watching me all these years. I'd spent so long studying him, leaning against the cinder blocks of various studios and studying his lift, how his leaps improved, how the muscle of his thigh seemed to reach out of his skin as he grew strong. He had been doing the same to me. We were both so trained to look at each other and nowhere else.

I picked up a larger pair of tights, cradled my hand over my scar so the tights wouldn't snap against it as I pulled them up to my waist. I forced myself to look at August as I stripped off my shirt and then my bra. I shimmied into the leotard, looked down at how the edges of my breasts pressed out of the spaghetti straps. I pulled them down and rehooked my bra. I reached into my bag of old shoes and at the bottom found a fresh box of pointe shoes.

The popular conception of pointe shoes is that they're pink, but my preferred brand was a golden satin, almost the same tone as my skin. I pressed my feet into the arch of them and stood, just for a second. I remembered the pain of this, but in this moment there was none of that. The flat box of the toe supported me and I hung, perfectly poised in the air. I had lost nothing. I took the shoe back off and began to prep it, bending the sole, standing on top of the firm toe box and trying to soften its edges.

August turned the lights back on. He sat down on my bed and I sat beside him. For a moment, I just looked at him. I felt like I needed to memorize everything about him. His skin was that delightful summer tone he'd always called "olive" and I could see lines on the sides of his face and top of his forehead where age had worn him. He raised his hands at me and gestured at me as if to say, *go on.*

I set the shoes beside him, walked over to my old stereo system and dug behind it, until I found the small sewing kit I kept there. I sat next to him and threaded my needle, measured out the elastic and sliced it. While I worked, August picked up one of the slippers.

"I feel like I've watched you do this a million times," he said. He touched his hand to the unbroken satin, then snapped the shoe twice against his palm, settled the arch between his knees and used his muscles to bend it.

"Careful," I said.

"Right," he said. "You're not one of those girls that cuts out the shank; your foot's strong enough to bend it."

Next I pulled the elastic and the ribbons out of the box and began to stitch them into place. With a pencil I marked where I would sew each piece, slipping the shoe onto my foot and measuring the exact height of my arches, measuring the ribbon against my flexed ankle so they would hit just the right mark on my leg and not cinch or bruise a vein. I asked for a match and cauterize the end of each slice of ribbon so it wouldn't fray. I stood.

"I remember how you used to rub your shoes down with calamine lotion," August said. "So the satin didn't catch on the lights in performance."

I walked to the corner of my bedroom and faced my back to him. The room wasn't particularly big, but the wood beneath my feet felt as firm as the floor at my mother's studio. I bent my right leg and stretched over the arch of that foot. Then my left. I had neglected to pack my shoes with lamb's wool or bandages, and already I could feel the hard box of the toe pinching me. I rose onto the balls of my feet a few times then *relevé*-ed all the way *en pointe* into second position. I *pliéd* deeply over both my arches. I closed my eyes and imagined myself on a stage. I wished I had a box of rosin to dip my feet in; the new satin felt uncomfortably slick.

I turned back to him and gestured to the towers of CDs around the stereo system.

"Pick something for me to dance to," I said.

"Well," he said, "do you want to go fast or slow?"

"Addagio," I said, and he bent, lifting up CDs and studying them.

"Prokofiev," he said. "Don't you think?"

He slipped the disc into the machine and I watched him. The music began. For the first few minutes, I moved at a fraction of the pace of the beat. I recalculated how to move

in the tight space of my bedroom. I considered each movement, naming the steps aloud as I completed them. *Piqué. Balancé. Pas de valse. Sissonne.* I tucked my toes behind my knees. I beat my feet together three times in the air. I leapt and stretched my legs into the splits. I forced myself to watch the movements in my bedroom mirror. My body was no longer the body of a dancer's, but still it knew how to flow between the poses, how to arch into the neat geometry it had once possessed. I just had to ignore the rest—the waggle of the undersides of my arms, how, when I finished a turn, the insides of my thighs collided with a wet *thwack*. I began to sweat.

I had forgotten how it felt to move in only a leotard and tights. As I danced, the leotard rose up over the fat of my behind. It threatened to wedge into my butt like a thong. I thought of August again that morning, walking up ahead of me with JUICY spelled out in rhinestones. I laughed and began to *pirouette*—doubles then triples. A few spots danced before my eyes; I was hungry. I'd hardly eaten since August had arrived in town. In the mirror, the spots made my body look like it was illuminated by stars.

I'd made a run in my tights sitting on the floor, and as I turned the rip expanded. I could see the pale milk of my legs, but also the boxy strength of them on each turn. I moved through the room with the whole silhouette of myself exposed. I flipped a *tour jeté* and heard the mesh tear even more. I knew that August could see the few dimples that ran from the back of my knee up to the rise of my ass. He sat, cross-legged, watching my soft, scarred body *pas de chat* across the floor while recorded violins kept my time.

As the waltz drew to a close I slowed my turns, my lifts. Stretched everything further than I had the beat before. I let my wrists breathe into each pose, bent my back until the top of my head touched the floor. I held myself there, evening my breathing into time with the music's notes. Then I broke my pose.

"Hold on a second," I said. I sat down next to him on the bed and kicked my toes twice against the hard floor, trying to reawaken the feeling in them. A reed flute took over the track and its foolish lightness made me flush. I looked down at myself and felt ashamed. August was sitting on my childhood bed, watching me dance in my ripped tights and I still couldn't admit to him how much I wanted him. There was an alternate self, I was sure, who could be this honest, who could say this to him. But there was no one else for me to inhabit, only myself. Even after everything, I still balked at the exposure my words might bring.

August stood. He reached for me and led me back onto my floor. He held my hips while I spun. Each time I caught sight of the flat points of my shoes I could see how the floor had already ripped at the satin of them, turned the fresh shine scuffed and grey. My turns slowed. Our dancing shifted into something smoother, less articulate. August tightened his hands around my hips and lifted me. I'd forgotten how this felt, forgotten how close it brought me to the ceiling, how my toes would tap against the tiles. I arched my back over his shoulder and split my legs so that my right foot reached for the ceiling and my left foot pointed down against his hip. He walked from one end of my bedroom to the other and I could feel the pressure of each of his fingers against my soft hips. Then he slid me back to the ground and touched me on the waist. He turned me to face him and I could see he was not even breathing hard: it had not been an impossible effort to lift me.

"I forgot what this was like," he said. "Dancing with you."

"What is it like?"

"Same way it always was: you walk onto the stage and make light."

I laughed and shook my head.

"You could still be a dancer," he said. "If you wanted to."

He went on: it didn't matter that I'd put on a few pounds. It didn't matter that the extra weight made my posture less exact than it once was. This was not what ballet was about. It was about the turn of my wrist, how the motion rolled out under my flared fingers like a plumping wing. The sharp alignment of my chin over my gesturing shoulder, urging the eye towards my pointed foot. The arch of that foot. Its lift. The delicate curve and slender ankle pushing against the floor and propelling my entire body forward. It was about the way the two of us looked together, how we moved like we were one body shaping one pose.

Through my window, we could see the stillness of the night outside. It was nothing more than a sharp horizon, nothing exotic beyond. August and I sat down and I pulled off my shoes. He held the ball of my ankle in his hand and studied my blisters, showed me the calluses he still carried on his toes.

"Plus," and here he struck that charming grin, the one all his ladies loved. "Your boobs look fantastic now."

I laughed and smacked him on the arm.

"Come with me to Utah," he said. "You'll be back on the stage in six months."

"You really think so?"

He looked up at me, so pleased. Yes, August, I know what part of the story you thought this was. You thought you'd saved me. You thought that now, suddenly, I'd realized I was beautiful all along, that all it took was one man's hand on mine to show me I had worth. You thought this was the moment where the woman steps into the water and becomes a swan.

"We're perfect together," he said. "We're the celebrity dance pair of our generation."

"No," I said. "I'm not a dancer anymore."

He shook his head and kept talking. I looked up at us in my bedroom mirror. We were sitting side by side over a split in the surface, so that half of each of our faces disappeared into the others. I reached up my hand and touched the side of my face that belonged to him. I could see how my fingers pushed dimples into the stubbled skin of his cheek. He fell silent. The slick floor of my bedroom was cold beneath us. Everything felt edged with charm. In the dim light, I performed an impossible feat: I stepped out of my own skin.

It was not weightless like the stories say. I didn't skim along the ceiling and look down at my own still self. Instead, I slipped down into August's body. I felt my own hand on his cheek like it was my cheek. I flexed my thighs and looked down at his wide legs performing the action, too. I turned to myself and touched my hip, pushed against it. It was so easy to move me. In this shapeless state, it was simple for me to open my mouth and confesses something to him.

"August," I said. "Sometimes I worry I'm turning into my mother."

I explained how, just like her, I'd ignored my symptoms for months. How I'd felt the pain in my stomach and assumed it was just the familiar stick of hunger. How determined I'd been, my whole life, to never fall in love. I believed that I could have affection or I could have a career. The choice was simple for me. And now I worried that I could see my mother's cruelties taking root inside of me, I could imagine myself thirty years into the future still living in this valley and chasing high school girls around the studio with a mocking parrot in my hand. The confession lingered in the air. There was only one response I wanted him to give. I wanted him to tell me I was wrong.

"You've never been in love?"

I snapped back into my body just like my mother would all those years ago in front of her record player. August was watching me. He didn't pull away from my hand, still tight against his own cheek, still trying to turn us into one face.

"I just can't quite believe that," he said. "It seems a little impossible."

I shrugged. He kept staring up at the ceiling and thinking.

"The problem," he said, "is that I think you've worked very hard not to fall in love."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean that you never really give people a chance."

"That's not fair."

"For example," he said, "tell me what happened with Lydia."

"That's different," I said. "I wasn't dating her. We had sex. Once."

"And? Why didn't you ever want to see her again?"

"Because I didn't," I said.

"But *why*? I'll take everything back if you can tell me one thing wrong with her."

"She likes me too much."

"She likes you too much? What does that even mean?"

"She's always excited to see me. It seems fake."

He looked at me and let his mouth gape open in comic surprise.

"Rose," he said. "That's what people do when they like someone. They ask them on dates; they want to see each other."

"Never mind," I said to him.

I didn't know how I could speak to him again after this night. I'd exposed too much of myself. I knew I would feel shame when I thought about him. He would move to Utah and I would stay here, sleeping with strangers passing through town, letting them touch the

stars along my stomach and announce that they thought single moms were sexy. In Utah, August would marry one of the women he danced with, although she would eventually leave him for another man. When he called to tell me she'd left him, I would not pick up the phone.

Or maybe not. Maybe the two of us would wake up the next morning in the same bed. We would prepare to go pick up my mother from the hospital together. The light would crack over the windowsill and he would touch his mouth to the hollow of my collarbone and say to me, *finally, I have been waiting for you for so long*…although even writing this makes me laugh, imagining either of us quite so romantic.

Or. I would say it to him straight: You like me too much, August. I can't follow you.

Or none of those. Maybe the next day we would return to the woods and stand beside the same lake. August would step carefully and avoid the shore. We would admit that neither of us quite knew what to do with each other. But still we would stand beside each other, looking at the dark grass beneath our toes, the nuclear flowers still showing their eager veins in the breeze, the birds in the lake, swimming.

All those futures seemed to stretch away from us like a fine white thread, like something that could be punctured by nothing smaller than a breath. There they were: glass bulbs of possibility in the air all around us. He pulled me closer to him. He put his hand back on my stomach, this time above my scar. We looked through the wide window out into the night and I thought, for a minute, that there was a new gallery around us, this gallery of possibilities. He could see it, too. So he touched me and I waited and neither of us could say which future, if any, we were about to step into. We could feel nothing but this exact second, the rough callus of his thumb, the soft skin of my stomach tucked into his palm.

Nine

When I woke up, August was standing over the sink, a pile of dishes foaming between his palms. It was dark outside. He'd unpinned the nuclear flowers from the ceiling beams and tied them up with a bow. They were propped up against a book in the middle of the kitchen table. I couldn't see into my mother's bedroom, but I was sure the suitcase he'd left in there had disappeared, packed away into his car.

"Were you planning to talk to me about this?" I said. What a foolish thing for me to say! "Were you even going to say goodbye?"

"Sure," he said. "Just let me finish cleaning this knife first."

He ran the blue sponge up and down the sharp spine of the blade, two delicate fingers wrapped around the hilt. Even in this, there was such grace.

He put down the knife and walked towards me. He hugged me, and his hands were soft and damp from being submerged in the soap. His mouth touched my ear, and he whispered something to me. Thank you, I think. I didn't ask him to repeat himself. It took him two steps to make it from my body to the door.

I didn't move. The sink was shining all the way down to its silver base, spotless. There was nothing to do but continue about my routine. I dressed for my run. I circled the neighborhood. I sat on my bed in my sweaty clothes and petted my own skin absently. I crawled back under the covers and fell asleep, woke with the sun in my eyes and the sheets tacky with sweat. I looked at the clock. It was only ten in the morning. I stood and walked back into my living room, peered into the kitchen again as if something might have changed, as if I might have imagined the entire morning. I went back to bed, but slept with only half

my mind, the other half primed and waiting for the sound of a car, a knock on the door, August returning and realizing he'd made an error. There was no noise.

I found myself thinking about my mother. I used to sleep with her each night when I was ten. This wasn't long after my father died; she claimed it comforted her to sleep with another body next to her own. So the two of us slept together and let our winter-chaffed knees knock together beneath the sheets. She had dark hair while mine was blond and I thought that made us just like sisters in a fairy tale. I imagined us as inseparable twins. She parted my hair on the opposite side and plaited my hair into an identical braid, held up her hands to me and feigned that I was her reflection. And then, when I turned ten, I began to grow. My mother would buy me tennis shoes one week and I would have outgrown them by the next. I grew seven inches in six months. My mother returned to her own bed. The bones inside of me stretched so fast I couldn't sleep through the night, I woke her up thrashing and clutching at my shins. At times, it seemed my skin wouldn't grow fast enough to cover my skeleton. Well I wasn't growing anymore. At least not vertically, as the old joke goes.

That afternoon, I dreamed a bone grew inside my throat. It tasted like chalk. I pushed my fingers down my mouth, reaching for it, and it slipped further down. My nails scraped the inside of my esophagus and I gagged, coughed, spat something into my hand. The small bone wriggled, and transformed into a short, fat body. Nebulous and white, something mysterious and essential from inside of me. For weeks after August left I would dream about it. Night after night. I would wake up to the sound of my own lungs and imagine it was August's hand on the door.

But I didn't know that the first day. I thought it was just a reminder of why I didn't like to sleep during the day. I walked back downstairs, picked up my keys from the counter, and drove down to pick up my mother from her hotel.

III.

The ballet mistress defined Swan Lake as a story about the conflict between the body and the soul, between Odette and Odile. It was a ballet, she said, about the battle to forget about our hungers. It was the last ballet you and I ever danced together.

To say the production was a disaster would be too kind: three minutes into the danse de cynges *and already you were tiring under the relentless speed of the conductor. You struggled to complete your triple* pirouette *in time. You* grand jeté-ed *across the back of the stage, chasing the tempo still. I could see the ballet mistress in the wings, trying to catch your eyes, flapping her arms in a panic and urging her to move faster. I felt your panic like it was my own.*

I'd taped up your ankle that afternoon. You were trying to keep tendinitis at bay, but I could see the tightening in your smile each time you extended or sunk into a fondu. *I could see the tape around your ankle. I could feel the pull in my own joints.*

A cymbal crash: my cue. I entered from the right wing and you raced towards me, the hard boxes of your pointe shoes hitting silently against the floor. You knew by now how to run without making noise. When I caught you and lifted you over my head, it felt easier than it had that afternoon.

You were losing weight again.

I walked you down the stage so that the audience could see how you arched over my shoulder, how the mesh of your tutu scraped against my face. Snow began to fall from the rafters. Leftovers from a production of

The Nutcracker *last season. We couldn't do anything but keep dancing. The corps de ballet entered from the wings.* Pas de chats. *I held your hips between my hands and led you across the floor. The snow that was falling was not snow. It was scraps from plastic bags. One caught in my mouth and nearly choked me. They built up on the floor and slid beneath my toes. The two of us spun closer to the edge of the stage and I dipped you so your head was hovering right over the pit of the orchestra. I never managed to train myself out of looking up into the audience: the dark absence of their shoulders, a few of their spectacles catching the stage light. And then I looked back at you. The point of your chin lead me to the curve of your fingers. Your mouth was open to show your teeth. I knew I would never forget the way you looked at me. It was like—*

—it would be too easy to say.

I lifted you again and walked off into the wings. Two stagehands walked up behind us and started stripping off our clothes. One was working on the laces of my tunic while the other pushed your tutu off your hips. They were applauding for us but it was nearly impossible to hear, naked in the wings. Your stagehand dropped a purple shift over your head. You had to be sewn into this costume; it never fit right. The needle skimmed through the fabric once, twice, and then you bent at the waist and gasped.

Our last entrance was from the opposite side of the stage. We moved slowly behind the backdrops so we wouldn't make the canvas flutter or sway. You pressed your feet into the rosin box and tapped the extra off her toes. I caught you rubbing at your stomach again, but you shook your head when I tried to ask how you were. I lifted you onto my shoulders and you sat, ankles crossed over my heart as we waited in the wings. I could feel each small circle my fingers were pressing into your thighs. You were so small. Some days it seemed to me you could disappear.

Nureyev forced Fonteyn to enter his production of Swan Lake by riding on a skateboard on her belly, arms lifted like wings, legs curled behind her like a tail. This is to say that sometimes grace is overrated. This is to say that I'm tired of stories about girls turning into birds, tired of the fetishization of a hollow bone.

I saw you performing in New York a few weeks ago; your body looked sharp enough to fracture a palm.

We entered and the music crescendoed. I lowered you to the ground and you waltzed away from me. I tracked you across the stage like you were an extension of my own body. We made one pose. Midway through the waltz, your costume began to slip down your shoulders. Your left breast popped out of the bodice, nipple pointing directly into the crowd. I covered you with my palm, lifted your strap and tucked you away.

I used to think you didn't ever get lonely.

At least, not the way the rest of us did.

One

My mother was waiting outside the hotel for me. She didn't look any different than she had a few days before. Still startlingly thin. She sat in the backseat instead of the front, said it couldn't hurt to keep a little extra distance between us for a few days. I pulled away from the hotel and she buckled into her seat. Then, she started asking me about how the rehearsals had gone. I said they were fine. I mentioned Lydia's struggle with the *pique* turns.

"I'm sure you handled it fine," she said. "You always were an expert at turns."

A compliment! It startled me.

"What else happened while I was away?" she said. "How was August?"

"I don't really want to talk about it."

She tried to ask me a few more questions, but it soon became clear that I did not intend to speak for the rest of the trip home. Even the idea of talking exhausted me. I had no idea how I'd keep living in my mother's house. His absence would be like a current in the air. Still, I kept driving. The cups of the mountains carried me back up into a familiar world: trees and farms. Gold opening its mouth like it could swallow the thin line of asphalt in a single pause.

The horizon spread itself before me. Living in DC, I'd forgotten how it felt to live in a place where I could hold so much ground inside my gaze. Not just a block away, not just two, but an entire state, maybe more. When we were twenty minutes away from home, it started to rain. I slowed to a crawl, imagined August beside me reciting statistics of skidding, how hydroplaning could occur at speeds of only thirty miles an hour. How could I live without him? Now the streets looked like slick tar, the lights of other cars skittering off the

dividing lines. I felt like I was driving over water and nothing more. The dark road like a small sea.

I remembered being very young and sitting in the back of my family car. This was when my father was still alive. I watched the two of them pilot the family car through the dark. We were driving back from a ballet class and I was pulling my pink tights down my legs, stripping out of my leotard and into my pajamas. My limbs were so small, no hair on the leg or the belly or even the arm. I looked up into the front of the car and watched my father drive, my mother's hand on his arm. As if her touch were transparent enough to lead her through the dark country roads. I realized I'd been echoing this scene every time I drove anywhere with August.

The rain ended and mist seemed to escape from the dirt, first rising a few inches above the ground, then a few feet, then the whole sky turned as opaque as the color of an eye. Streets like small underwater clouds. Mirage of fog. Where it hit the window of the car it condensed into small rivulets. My mother's head had tilted onto her window. She was asleep.

I pulled off the highway. It was almost ten pm. I could see a small soccer field opening off one side of the road. The mist was thick enough that I could not make out the bodies of the boys. I could see only the black lines of the numbers on the backs of their jerseys. The sevens and ones and fives migrating through the fog like floating creatures. Running, running, running. The lights above them caught the wet air and intensified its glow. Up and down the bleachers around them were women, large and small, married and unmarried, watching them. Every few seconds one would go wild. She would stand and wave her hands about in the air. One boy would turn around, maybe with half a smile, that expression August used to hold on his face when I watched him dance, pleased to know someone was rooting for him, embarrassed to know there were eyes on his back.

The Rockies were something different in the light of the moon. They caught a shine they never held in the day. Especially now, in the milk evening, the moon the same color as the sky. I saw fox eyes lurking in the tall grass, families and families of deer that neared my headlights, turned, and race the other way. The silver musk of a possum.

As I took the exit for our town, I caught sight of the first highway marker for Salt Lake City. So. It wasn't too far away. I let this thought buoy me back home, imagined how easy it would be for August and I to visit each other. He could return and find me here; we were only six hours apart. The truth is: he never came, although I kept thinking he would. There were afternoons I would sit on the porch and study the blocky torsos of the mountains and think to myself, now he will come for me. Now, now, now.

Two

My mother took the next morning off from rehearsal as well. I didn't complain; I was happy to have something to distract myself with. The temperature was cool in the studio, cooler still outside. I knew that it would begin to snow in a week, maybe less. I could hardly remember what winter looked like here, but knew it was knee deep and stripped with wind. As the girls practiced, the window began to fog over. We were working on the third act that afternoon: the entrance of the black swan. I'm sure you know how it goes: Odile replaces Odette. She tricks the prince into declaring his love to her instead. She's the darker replica of a swan; she seduces him. The performance was only a few weeks away so Lydia was rehearsing in her tutu. She kept setting her hand on her hips and testing out the width of it. It was unfamiliar to her; she often stood too close to the other dancers and knocked against them with the gauzy cloth.

I cued the music and gestured for Lydia to begin. She hammed up her performance, pursed her lips like she was constantly preparing for a kiss. When I was younger, I used to relish the chance to step into the darker tutu, to mime at seduction. I loved the differences between the two girls: one pure and virginal, the other sensual and experienced. From the second the black swan enters the stage Odette is doomed. She tries to court the prince surrounded by other women. Odile knows to dance for him completely alone. She knows the prince would rather have the girl without the overprotective handmaidens. She knows he wants to pledge his love to the girl that throws herself into his arms.

Lydia *forte* turned in the air, turned her neck towards the audience and attempted to seduce them with a grin. Yes, when I was young I saw this scene as something simple: it was a story about cruelty between women. One of many in the world. But today I was seeing it as

something new. It was about the small cruelties that women performed to themselves. A girl was lifting her body into the air and falling, trusting someone to catch her. She was seducing a man and murdering her twin.

Our ballet studio had no men; Lydia leapt into my arms.

I moved to the corner of the room and waited as she prepared, then ran at me, her feet slapping noisily against the floor. I knew how this was supposed to work, had leapt into August's arms for so many years. It was easy for me to imagine how I should lift her. My body performed exactly as I wanted it to; I felt her weight land on me.

When she jumped, her legs bent and didn't straighten again. Improper technique. It was twice as hard to catch her, to mold her body back into the proper pose. I corrected her leg with my right shoulder and dipped her. The tutu scraped along my bare arms like a nail file. I could feel her skeleton. Nineteen, and she was still as thin as a growing girl, not even a hint of breasts. Her shoulder blades felt as sharp as their name, pushing against the slender prison of her skin. Her weakness became tangible.

I set her back down on the floor and she smiled. She looked up at the wide windows, where a few men were now leaning against the glass and watching her, silhouetted by a frame of condensation. They looked red around the pupils, carrying the symptoms of last night's festivity. Lydia dipped her head, performed a decorative curtsey. The men turned away from her, flushed. Lydia looked over her shoulder at me and smiled.

The problems in form that I had let slide a few days earlier bothered me more today. I pulled her back to the center of the room and explained each way her steps were wrong. I commanded her to perform the routine again and chased her around the room, clapping my hands. Faster, I told her. Attack the floor.

I kept her after the other girls went home with their mothers; I knew no one would be coming to complain that she'd been out too late. By now, her form was nearing perfect. Still, I couldn't let her leave. I criticized the placement of her fingers. I told her that her wrists made her look like an amoeba. I stomped my foot on the ground like a small child. She never once stopped or told me she'd had enough. She kept moving; her desire to please me was palpable.

I exhausted myself demanding things from her. I told her I had to step outside for some air and still she stayed in the center of the room practicing her *fouettés*. I stood out on the small wooden porch of my mother's studio and pressed my hands to my face. I'd always had this tendency to expect too much, but I'd only ever applied it to myself. Now, forcing Lydia through her steps, I could see where my mother's anger had come from; she needed someone to demand things of.

Lydia stepped out onto the porch next to me and crossed her arms over her chest. She smelled like jasmine and whiskey. She put her head on my shoulder and I could see her pantomiming at exhaustion. Performing for me, just like she had been all day.

She had changed out of her tutu and was wearing only a white V-neck and pair of denim shorts. She held a pair of sandals in her hands and I looked down at her dirty feet, cut and blistered around each toe. I imagined how I might tape them up to set them in a pair of pointe shoes. I looked up at her face and caught the dark outlines of her nipples reaching through her shirt. I reached down and put my hand on her thigh, pressed my thumb into the knotted muscle. Then I skimmed my thumb higher, tucked it under the frayed denim of her hemline.

She kissed me. Her hands reached for the button on my shorts almost instantly and when she pulled the denim down, just enough to make room for her fingers, she paused at

the scar between my hips. She said she hadn't noticed this before. She asked me if that was why I had stopped dancing. I pushed her down so that I was on top and both of our bodies were lowered onto the slats of the porch. I slid my hand beneath her shorts, inside her underwear. She stopped talking. I pulled off her shorts and let my mouth follow their path. The first few minutes I was touching her, she made so much noise I knew she had to be faking, knew it was something she'd practiced to stroke the egos of the boys at school. I spread her thighs wider with my hands and stroked inside her. Her voice lowered, became stuttering and soft. She touched my hair.

The wood was hard beneath my knees and I knew that any moment someone might spot us. Still, I didn't stop touching her. Unfamiliar in pleasure, she seemed shamed by the motion of her hips against my mouth. Over the years, I'd known women who proclaimed they'd love to sleep with another women, the same way children announce they want to be astronaut. It must be so lovely, they'd say, because women know what women want. I'm not sure that I believe that's true, although touching Lydia there were moments I felt like I was touching the inside of my own skin. But it wasn't soothing. It was like I was holding the most tender and horrifying parts of myself between my two palms. I watched Lydia gasp beneath me, watched her face screw into ugly pleasure and I hated knowing that other people had once seen the same expression on me.

Afterwards, I rested my head on her thigh and she started combing her fingers through my hair.

"My mother hates your mother," she said. She seemed half asleep. "Our families are at war; we're like Romeo and Juliet."

I smiled. I stood up and touched the impossible dimple in her cheek. She really did like me too much. I wanted to do something kind for her.

"I have to ask," I said. "Why does your mother keep feeding those foxes?"

"The same reason anyone does anything," she said. "Company."

Then she pulled up her shorts and patted her hand once against my cheek. She walked off into the night.

Three

I walked home, but I didn't go inside. Instead, I sat on my mother's porch and remembered talking with August here the night before. I felt some of my earlier anger still percolating beneath my skin. I didn't know how to stop it. Back at ABT, the joke was that I was an animal. When I lost my temper in rehearsal, they'd call for August. They called him my trainer. He was never intimidated when I showed my teeth.

Across the street, the lights stayed off on The Fox Lady's porch. Lydia had not come home and it seemed her mother was absent, too. I watched as the foxes began to circle her porch. They stayed for hours before they finally turned their tails up and left. Around ten, I saw lights in the house go on, The Fox Lady walking to her sink in a bathrobe. She'd been home the entire time. I wondered why this night she'd chosen to turn her animals away. She filled a cup with water. The light turned off again.

It was late, past eleven, and what little I could see I could only see by the light of the moon. In this lonely landscape, I saw something begin to move towards me on four legs. As it drew closer I realized it was a fox. It hadn't left with the others. It was looking for another woman to feed it. I cupped my knees to my chest and drew back into my chair as it climbed the slats of my stairs. It sniffed the wood and stopped only a few feet away from my shins.

I didn't know what to do. If I moved, I was sure it would attack me. I had seen other wild animals up close. I lived in the mountains. I watched the foxes each night next door. I'd seen a bear cross the street in front of my mother's house, had watched a cub fish around in a dumpster. I'd even caught the tail of a wolf disappearing down a mountain road. But in all those moments I'd been looking at the creatures through glass—car, house, bar. I could never hear them breathe.

The delicate triangle of the fox's nose twitched in the evening air. She looked straight at me. I waited for her snarl, her leap. She keened, deep in her throat. It was a lazy noise, like the sound a dog makes when it's roused from sleep. Her tongue peered out from the bow of her mouth. A yawn. She was pale and solid; I could see how perfectly she would blend into the bleached grass, the brown bark of a tree. She understood the art of stillness.

She took another step towards me, head bowed. On the porch, her paws were almond dark and covered in mud, splatters up her chest. The fox raised its head and I could see the amber of her gaze. White lines beneath the sockets emphasized their glow like eyeliner. She took two steps back, a crouch.

If she came towards me, I would have no defense. The fox rumbled again, flickering its eyes away from mine. I spotted a low hanging bulge, the swell of her nipples. She was pregnant. She walked even closer to me and I froze up. She butted her nose against my hand. She did it again. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a half-sandwich I'd hidden at lunch that afternoon. She knocked it out of my hand with her nose and began to eat.

Years have passed since that day and I'm still startled remembering the tameness of that animal. How simply it trusted me. She was as gentle with me as my mother's horse had been years earlier, even though she was starving and desperate to feed the babies growing inside of her. She should have pounced on sight. But she didn't. She studied me with her wide eyes. She ate from my hand. When she was finished, she began to back away from me and I felt the exact same way I had in my hospital room: small, insignificant. All of my desires felt easy, my hungers dumb and simple. She backed further away, off the porch. Her swollen belly rustled against the grass. See, this animal seemed to be saying to me, what a body like mine can grow? Then she was off, racing down the street, her motion whisking on

the motion sensor lights of The Fox Lady's front lawn, like a pair of opening eyes that stared, tense, into the night and then slowly blinked off again.

I sat alone on the porch and willed myself to see the animal again for a long time. Midnight came and I began to shiver. Then, the police sirens started up the hill.

Four

Because this was the fifth time this month my mother had called the police on her neighbor, the officer wondered if she would come down to the station and fill out a formal report. She said she couldn't. Actually, she shouted this down from her bedroom window.

"Mam," he said to her. "Won't you step outside?"

"I can't," she said. "I'm radioactive."

It must say something about the temperament of this town that the office reacted with relative calm to this statement. He nodded his head and scribbled something on his notepad. Meanwhile The Fox Lady was standing behind him, protesting loudly.

"She has no right to file a complaint," she said. "No right at all!"

"You're bringing dangerous animals into our neighborhood!" My mother said. "You're a menace!"

"You live in the middle of the fucking woods!" The Fox Lady, rebutting. "Of course there are fucking foxes here!"

I guess I should have expected the cursing. It's not like people who feed wild animals are usually of sound mind.

"One of them came after my daughter." My mother tilted further out the window, so her breastless chest was dangling over the pane. "It came right up onto our porch. It could have hurt her."

The officer asked my mother if I could prove her claim, but I didn't say anything. None of them had even seen me. I was lying on my back on the porch, staring up at the stars. I could have stood and walked a few steps and solved this entire problem for my mother, but instead I stayed perfectly still and listened to the two women yelling at each

other, the officer repeating what he'd been saying to my mother for months: he couldn't see any foxes, so he couldn't prove any of her claims. Finally, the police lights faded. I heard my mother's window close.

It wasn't that I didn't want to help her; it was that I felt that if I moved my entire body might splinter apart. I held my body together with my hands and felt the stick of hunger in my gut. I smiled. In the dark, I lifted my shirt over my head, dropped it to the floor. I pushed down my shorts. I touched the white cotton of my underpants and my bra and then, taking a deep breath, I pressed my fingers to either side of my hips. I tried to feel out the bone. I couldn't, but I could feel the stiffness in my thighs, my calves. The dancing the other night had left its mark on me. I missed this familiar soreness.

Around me, the fog began to return. My mother used to wake me up on white mornings and tell me the fog maiden had come in the night. Soft magic in her slender hands. I never remembered the charm of her. I saw her, always, at the kitchen table, fork poised over a simple salad. Those few years that my father pantomimed at becoming a grill master, feeding his family, searing lamb chops, thick-boned steaks, a whole host of animals my mother never even let touch her plate. He would always offer half of his portion to my mother. She would smile and say she only wanted the salad, and how I would hate her then, as she looked up at me. Doesn't it feel powerful, she would ask, to say no?

After dinner, I would find her bent over the kitchen sink, working on the leftover bones of my father's steak like a dog. If I caught her at it, she would smile. She would say that the meat closest to the bone was the tenderest bit. I was so caught up in hating her, for resenting the way she'd made me look at myself. I never realized she must have looked at herself the same way, too. I never realized I could have leaned across the table, put my hand

on her wrist, and asked her if she was tired. A whole life between the two of us composed only of denial.

I touched my stomach again. When I sat up, hunger made spots dance in front of my eyes. My mother was right: it did feel powerful to say no.

I stood up and walked inside. In the kitchen, the flowers August had pinned still maintained their perfect form. They splashed color onto the dark table and I couldn't help bending my face to them. An odor came off of them like cooked garlic.

I walked up the stairs and felt the protest in my limbs. I opened the door to my mother's room. I saw her eyes open and she sat up, alert.

"Don't come in," she said. "I could still hurt you."

But I walked closer to her anyway. I flipped open the covers and slid into bed next to her like I was a small girl. I pressed my face into her pillow and caught a whiff of August's deodorant. He'd slept here just a few nights before. My mother put her hand in my hair.

I thought I might say something else to her—an apology for not telling the police about the foxes—but it felt too simple. Then I thought of admitting something larger: how my body felt like it had become something outside of my own control, how I was tired of denying love, how I wished, sometimes, that I could take all the years of my life back and become her friend. But instead I just moved closer to her. I smelled of sweat and a small clutch of jasmine from Lydia's perfume. I wanted to feel ashamed about this, but I couldn't. My mother reached out and pulled me even closer. I rested my head on the ball of her shoulder, where her skin might part to form a wing.

I closed my eyes. I could still see her, hand upturned on her pillow. The green glow of the street and the moon pressed through the window and shaded the white sheets, the white face of my mother. Everything starched and began to blend. In the eerie palate around

me, I crept my own hand closer to hers. Her skin felt brittle, as rough as dried leaves lifted from an autumn tree. Already, her fingers felt heavier. Already, her body had begun to soak in nutrients. I looked again at her face and imagined I could see softness around the bones of her eyes.

Maybe this was it, the thing that I had wished for. Not anything about August after all, but this dark room. My knuckles on top of my mother's knuckles. Likeness, emerging between the two of us, our differences dissolving after all this time. I imagined a double of myself, standing at the side of the bed, stepping back from the scene, watching. I imagined she viewed it all through the lens of an x-ray. Two skeletons. Bones over bones. How, after all this time, both of our bodies would glow.

Notes

Some moments in this novel are meant to directly mirror incidents that occurred between Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev. In certain cases, characters in the book repeat words that Fonteyn or Nureyev said to each other. All quotations are taken from Julie Kavanagh's biography of Rudolf Nureyev: *Nureyev*. Theatre reviewer Robert Greskovic describes Fonteyn's performance of Odette as "a little symphony of shifts and shades" (273). This is referenced in the novel on page 4. One of Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev's choreographers couldn't work with the two of them because he though Nureyev was too curt with Fonteyn. He said he was "brought up to believe that a ballerina is a sacred object" (276). This is referenced by August on page 4. On page 38 of the novel, Rose compares herself to a letter Erik Brunh wrote to Rudolf Nureyev that opens: "my dearest, beautiful monster" (270). Nureyev pushed to make Prince Siegfried a more complex character in his rendition of *Swan Lake because,* "the prince was exceptional man. It does not happen just to everyone to see there are swans" (249). This is referenced in the novel on page 62. On page 91 August repeats something Nureyev once said about Fonteyn: "she came onstage and she made light" (253). On page 99 August references an established idea of *Swan Lake* as "the conflict between soul and body, between Odette and Odile—or, if you want, between East and West, between the Kirov's purity of tradition, and the more degenerate pleasures of the Western ballet world" (318).