Counting Geese & Other Insomnias
a novella and stories

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In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not.

- William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

In the absence of an effective general mythology, each of us has his private, unrecognized, rudimentary, yet secretly potent pantheon of dream.

- Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Insomnia as a badge of honor, proof you are paying attention.

- Jenny Offill, *Weather*

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First Date, Last Night

On the Thursday after Labor Day, Chicago was still a city of summer. Last week, the city was sweltering and the people were sick of sweating, but now, a night as warm as this one, when summer was supposedly over, that was something to acknowledge. The people were sticking to their clothes still, and surely there would be more warm days to come but the memory of autumn was itching in their bones. Soon, as quick as a beating heart, it would be grey, and the winds would cut, and the sky would fall in wet shapes, and they would never again feel as warm as they did tonight.

Most people left their offices early in order to sip sweet drinks on the street or sway softly to live music in small parks. Mothers pushed their children outside and said soon, soon this will all be gone, while their husbands, if they had them, spoke from the other room, should we go out tonight? I think we should go out tonight. Their children laced up their shoes and took to the stairs, to the back alleys, to the sidewalks, running up and down their blocks, heralds announcing the end, the end of joy, the end of freedom. Shop owners propped open their doors with what they could find, potted plants, a sack of flour, bricks from the lot across the street. A breeze blew through the streets and the sun's orange light caught itself in each buildings' glass façade.

In a city of workers, so few were thinking about labor. The waitresses wore big smiles and the bartenders poured with steady hands. The cooks were laughing, smoking their cigarettes at the backdoor. They all had a love at home who said they smelled too much like grease, like garlic, like peppers and fat and yeast. Delivery drivers sat in traffic, rolled their windows down, stretched their arms out into the air. Hotel clerks stood as straight as they could. The offices in all

the tall buildings downtown were emptied like a tub of water when the drain was pulled. Everything ran down and the watershed of people spread out into the evening.

The whole city took to the street, moving from its edges to its center, or from its center to the wave-stretched border. Music slipped out of doors and windows like smoke, mixing into something atonal and arrhythmic, and still the people danced. A bar played an old record: *I saw a man. He danced with his wife in Chicago.* It was the sound of horns and keys and guitars. Here, a screech of laughter, one hand, stretched above the crowd until another hand reached up, wrapped around the wrist, and pulled it back down. On a Thursday night, full, everyone was in motion. Wherever they walked, they could smell the people moving in opposite directions, whiffs of sweat and sex and undeniable momentum, towards, towards, towards. Everyone, despite their best intentions, had sweat through their clothes and the ends of their hair were damp with moisture, and still, to everyone they passed, they said it's a beautiful night, isn't it? Perhaps one of the last we will ever know.

Naomi got off the train at Fullerton and walked down Lincoln Avenue. It was already after six-thirty. She passed men with their shirts unbuttoned and women in short, glittery dresses. Everyone smiled at her as she walked by and Naomi smiled back. Just walking down the street could be invigorating when the sky above her was clear. Naomi felt like the city itself was grinning wide and she did the same. The bar she was looking for was on the next block and from where she was walking, she could see the door was already open.

Leslie was telling Naomi about his name. Naomi stared at Leslie's mouth as he spoke. She watched how he made words: his soft tongue clipped itself against his hard teeth, his lips coming together in points of pressure, and there, past his strong chin, was a throat where all

manner of vibrations erupted in their own particular order. Leslie and Naomi were talking about their families, the weather, and their jobs. They were sitting in a Cuban bar in Lincoln Park. They had agreed on it before. The bartenders with wide smiles bustled behind a wicker-adorned bar, poured velvety liquor into sweating glasses. There was a lush jungle foliage wallpaper that hung on every wall and so much brass, shined gold. There were only a dozen or so tables, all occupied. Naomi and Leslie sat at the bar, right at its curve, where the centrifugal force was at its highest, where the countertop turned and became parallel with front the bar, the bay window, and the propped-open door. The afternoon light splayed itself across Leslie's and Naomi's backs.

It's a woman's name, Leslie said. I know it was a man's name as well, and I know it was likely a man's name first, but now it's definitely more common to meet a woman named Leslie than a man. Every seat at the bar was full. Women had their hair up and men had opened the top buttons on their shirts. This Leslie, he said, placing his open palms against his own chest as if confessing, is a man, more of a man than being named Leslie makes me out to be. Naomi dragged her thumb a down the glass of beer in her hand, pulling down the condensation with her. I've never even met another man named Leslie. I looked up the census information once, and I can't remember the exact numbers now, but believe me, there were definitely more women than men named Leslie.

Naomi believed in the power of a second beer and raised her hand at the bartender. She still had on her clothes from work, a navy skirt suit and white button-up shirt that stuck to her abdomen in wet and salty spots. She had rolled up her sleeves, and her blazer hung off the back of her chair. Leslie continued on about his family, while Naomi made note of all the brilliant things in the room. The reflective watches on the men's wrists, the designer sunglasses on the women's heads, the brass of the bar, the sound the glasses made when knocked together. Leslie

was the youngest of three boys. His oldest brother was named James, which was their father's name, too, following in the long tradition of Native men being named James, or Jim, or John. His other brother's name was Paul-Michael, who also didn't like his name, but conceded that being named Leslie was far worse. Leslie was named after his mother, and here, Naomi leaned in. She held that second beer in her hand, pressed her warm palm against the cool glass.

Leslie's mother was a woman named Leslie. His mother had wanted daughters, the eldest of which she would name after herself. His mother said it was ridiculous that men found encouragement and even honor in naming their sons after themselves, yet women who did the same with their daughters were considered egotistical and vainglorious. Naomi thought of those words, egotistical and vainglorious, and wondered if they belonged to the woman named Leslie or the man. My mother had a complicated pregnancy with Paul-Michael, the man named Leslie continued, and decided that her third child would be her last. She told my father that she would name that child Leslie regardless of sex. He agreed, but when she gave birth to me, a boy, he swore up and down that he would never let her name their son Leslie. But she did. Naomi could see the delivery room, some boiling man walking in circles at the foot of the bed. She saw a woman named Leslie holding a child, a little boy, looking down at his face, while she ignored his father's tantrums and tirades. Which parent did this Leslie seated at the bar most resemble? Did his brothers also have his thick head of curly black hair? Did his father have this same crooked nose? Did he have his mother's eyes along with her name?

Leslie told Naomi about his brothers who were so much older than him that it was almost cruel, and that it forced a closeness with his mother. He talked about how his mother never let him go by a nickname, never Les or Lee, and she made his father do the same. He talked about his father and his silence. His father had left his reservation in Oklahoma when he was eighteen

years old and never talked about it. Leslie wished he would so that Leslie could understand. He wished his father would stand close to him and say this is who you are.

Naomi knew who she was, and she was a woman who had just finished her second beer. Already the evening was losing its luster, and still the sun was high in the sky, and still the air outside was hot and the ceiling fans moved too slowly to offer any comfort. If Naomi was granted a singular wish in this moment, she would have wished for a cool breeze to whisk down Lincoln Avenue, through the propped open door of this Cuban bar, that the breeze would tickle the wet skin on the back of her neck and give her cause to raise her arms without thinking.

Naomi ordered herself a third beer while Leslie told more stories, about his name, about his brothers, about his mother and father. Naomi thought it sounded like he actually loved his name, that he used as a door to guide people through, that he loved his family so deeply, even in its disparate pieces, that it came out as a kind of dislike of himself, in his participation of it all. He needed to reiterate over and over again that this was not the right name for him, not the right role, that he could be somebody better, and so Naomi listened. She listened through a fourth and a fifth beer, and a bus ride back to his place in Wrigleyville, and sweaty sex in bed under an open window. When Leslie fell asleep and had no more stories to tell, Naomi listened to him breathing beside her, and the orchestra of street noises that played out in his neighborhood, and waited for the sun to come up.

They arrived at the Cuban bar they had agreed on, but every seat was full. Naomi said it looked boring and stuffy before she could stop herself. On the days that followed a night of no sleep, Naomi found the lines between herself and the world to be quite thin; her thoughts became words in an instant. There was no time for distillation tonight. Naomi held her blazer in her hand

and had taken her hair down on the train. The headache at the base of her skull was subsiding, but not gone entirely. Leslie suggested the dive bar next door and Naomi agreed. The dive bar was dark with large classic arcade games blocking the front windows. Twinkling Christmas lights hung from the ceiling. Leslie ordered them beer that came in plastic cups. Leslie already wanted to apologize, for the full bar next door, for the plastic cups in his hands now, for the heat, for Naomi's sleepless night. This was a first date; he wanted it to be special. He asked all the right questions, and between rounds of Pac-Man, Dig Dug, and Frogger, Naomi answered them. Yes, I have a sister, Ramona. She still lives in Michigan. My mom is a teacher. My dad is a lot of things. They are divorced. A few years ago. No, I don't really like working at the hotel, but I can afford an apartment all by myself. Barely, it's small and my neighbors are loud all the time. Between the games and the questions, Naomi drank more, and whatever agitation that hung on her shoulders when they first walked into the bar began to slip off.

Leslie laughed at her jokes, which weren't ever really jokes, just funny ways of saying things. Leslie found Naomi's whole nature humorous. He met a beautiful woman with a stern look in her eye working the front desk at the Swissotel, and this woman here at the bar was someone else entirely. He liked them both, the one from before at the hotel, and this one now, who wouldn't look at him when she spoke, and jumped when she beat his score. She was out of place here, in her starched skirt and her delicate blouse and pantyhose, where everyone else wore ripped jeans and t-shirts, yet she made no discounts of herself. Every sharp edge of her cut into the room, into him, too quickly for anyone to register any pain or blood. It was difficult to know if there would be more dates, more dive bars, another round of beers or games. Leslie thought if he had to sustain himself off of one moment and time, one instance or memory, it would be this

one, where a woman was barely paying him any attention while he drank beer out of a plastic cup.

They met at the Cuban bar for lunch. They ordered sandwiches and plantain chips. Conversation passed between them freely, but nothing of substance or depth. They commented on the weather, the kinds of work they did, which parts of the city they lived in, where they got their groceries, where they worked out, who they knew here. Leslie ate only half of his sandwich and none of his plantains, which Naomi saw as something more profound, something unexciting and limiting. Leslie worked nights and slept during the day, and had only just woken up about twenty minutes ago. He didn't often spend time under the sun like this, never morning or midday, always afternoon, evening, dusk, the fullness of night. Leslie mostly ate dreams for lunch, and even though he had skipped today, he was still too full to eat.

After lunch, Leslie walked Naomi to the train that she would take back to work. He held the Styrofoam box in his hand and Naomi couldn't leave that box alone in her mind. The next morning when she called her sister, how would Naomi tell her that this box told her everything she needed to know about him? Just so simple. So unadventurous. A man who couldn't finish a meal. Her sister would laugh. Naomi was almost laughing now. When Leslie asked if they could do this again some time, Naomi said sure, and then never returned his calls.

They met at the pier in shorts and tank tops. The summer heat was still strong, and the lake offered no reprieve. Naomi and Leslie sweated and drank sweet things and never sat down for a full meal, just a pretzel here, nachos there, ice cream at the end. With the lights of the Ferris wheel reflecting off her wet face, Leslie said he thought Naomi was the most beautiful woman

he'd ever seen. With cilantro in his teeth, laughing, Naomi thought Leslie was the most joyful man she'd ever met. They told only funny anecdotes all night.

Once, on a family vacation, Naomi was saying, on this very pier, my dad took me on the Ferris wheel with him, even though he knew I was terrified. I couldn't stand being that far away from the ground freaked me out. Of course, the ride shut down while our car was at the very top. I screamed and screamed, and there was my dad, just on the other side of the car, barely paying attention to me. I was maybe six or seven. At some point, I got tired of screaming, and just cried to myself while I stared straight out the window, not wanting to look down. I could see so much, and as long as I kept my head high, it wasn't scary anymore. When we came back down, I apparently begged him to go again, practically pulled him back into line. Naomi was smiling wide as she finished her story, a bright wetness in the corner of her eyes.

Sometime when I was around eight or nine, Leslie said, and Paul-Michael was eleven or twelve, we were at an amusement park in Ohio, and our favorite ride was always the elevated swings. We waited in line for over an hour, and Paul had been complaining about needing a bathroom. Leslie paused, the laughter of the memory already reaching his lungs. Eventually it was our turn, and we got locked into our seats and suddenly Paul is looking at me wide-eyed and just saying, oh no, oh no, oh no, over and over again, and he's squirming in his seat. Well, the ride takes off and we are up there above everybody, just swinging in the air, and then Paul is peeing! Like actually peeing, not just a little even, and it's coming down on everyone waiting in line around the ride, and I could not stop laughing, and Paul was so embarrassed, but there wasn't anything he could do, so he's laughing too. We got back down, and just took off running before anyone could say anything. We decided the best thing we could do was just put his shorts in the bathroom sink and get the whole thing wet. That would wash the shorts a little and hide the

pee stain. That's how our dad found us, in the men's bathroom sink, Paul in just his skivvies, washing his shorts, and we were still laughing. I don't remember if our dad was mad or if he just laughed along with us.

Naomi and Leslie traded these stories back and forth until they could barely hold themselves upright, their insides bent in laughter. They stayed at the pier until it closed, and they were ushered out by tired workers. As they rode the train back to Leslie's apartment, Naomi felt two rib bones break off inside, making room for a man like Leslie. They looked at each other as the train rose from the tunnels to its elevated position in the northern part of the city, then at the buildings passing by, and they held on to each other's sticky bodies until they missed Leslie's stop. The train continued north, past Argyle, Bryn Mawr, Loyola, past the end of the line, further north, all the way to heaven.

Do you want kids? Naomi asked. She didn't care for rules or etiquette, or anything they write in magazines that a woman should never do or say on a date.

I think I do, Leslie replied, showing no concern over her question. I think I would make a good father.

Naomi gave a half-smile. Do you want boys or girls?

Boys, definitely boys, with strong masculine names.

Her smile grew, and she rolled her eyes. He smiled in return. In the sparse, warm lighting of the Cuban bar, she studied his face and tried to imagine him as a boy. He was young, only a few years older than she was, but his face appeared older. His dark eyebrows danced across a prominent ridge that made his golden-brown eyes look darker than they were, and his nose was strong and crooked at a point in the middle. Even with no facial hair, he looked probably ten

years older than his age. His skin was a complex pinkish brown, like warm clay, glowing with many months of summer tans. His hair was a soft black, a color she ironically was always chasing for herself with boxes and boxes of convenience store hair dye, and it delicately curled just around his ears.

It was only their first date, but she thought little boys that looked like him would love her so deeply that her chest twisted in their direction.

I want boys, too, she said.

It was too beautiful of night to sit inside, they agreed. Leslie and Naomi walked around the ponds in Lincoln Park and counted up their coincidences. They had both grown up in Michigan towns twenty minutes apart. They went to rival high schools. They were both the youngest in their families. They both had siblings who recently had children. Leslie and Naomi both had parents who still lived in their childhood homes, had mothers who called them constantly to ask when they were moving back. They both had made quiet promises to themselves to never do that. Neither had a particularly good reason for doing so, just that it was a place they had already been, and neither of them was interested in repeating themselves. They both moved to the same city, about a year apart. Leslie's first job had been at a burger bar on Wacker Drive, and Naomi worked at the Swissotel just down that same street. They were two Midwest kids, seemingly aimless products of middle-class families, now in Chicago with big smiles and tired eyes.

Leslie said they were lucky they got out. Naomi didn't feel that way. She felt that she was still inside a far-reaching rubber band, that was either set to snap or slingshot her back. From the path, they could see across Lake Shore Drive, to the beach still crowded people in the early

evening. Beyond that was Lake Michigan, and beyond that was nothing either Leslie or Naomi could see. It was just blue.

There was a miscommunication. Naomi sat at a sports bar in Lakeview, Leslie at a pie shop in Logan Square. They both waited and took deep breaths. Naomi drank a beer, chatted some with the bartender, and went home early. The next morning, she called her sister and said her date was cute and nice, but all together uninteresting, that she probably wouldn't see him again. Leslie didn't buy anything. He just sat, waiting for someone to tell him he had made a mistake.

Leslie bought tickets for them to see a movie. They sat through the whole thing; Naomi's eyes closed every few minutes. When it was over, neither could say what they saw. Leslie remembered laughing. Naomi thought she teared up at the end. Leslie asked if she wanted to join him for a drink, but it was already late, and this was already a night she was forgetting. He said he should call her in a few days, and they would do something else together. When he called and asked if she wanted to go to dinner, Naomi was confused.

It's Leslie? From the night before last.

I'm sorry, I think you have the wrong number.

This is Naomi, isn't it? Naomi Erikson?

Yes, this is she… I'm sorry, who is this again?

It's Leslie! Leslie! Leslie from before? We saw a movie together.

I'm sorry, I don't think – I don't remember.

Naomi hung up the phone. She worried that the man on the other phone would think she was someone else, someone who did know him, who had seen a movie with him, and that person was being unkind. But Naomi hadn't been on a date in months. She wasn't sleeping well, which wasn't new for her, but this exhaustion was hanging low in her. This time it was running her ragged. Her social life had dwindled to evening phone calls with her sister as she lounged on her couch.

A few days before that, a handsome man with beautiful skin had come into the hotel and stood at her desk. But he never asked for her number or asked her out. He left the lobby and went out into the street. And her day continued on. Naomi remembered that man. He was so beautiful. How could she forget?

Most Thursdays, Naomi went for a run after work. When Leslie had invited her to join him for a drink that Thursday, Naomi had said no, but offered for him to join her in Grant Park for a jog. Leslie wore long basketball shorts and flat-bottomed canvas shoes. Naomi looked him over and motioned with her hand for him to follow and she turned to run down the paved path. Leslie tripped and stumbled behind Naomi the whole time. He couldn't hold conversation, so Naomi talked, almost bouncing as she slowed her gait to match his, laughing, bubbling in her own conversation that he contributed to with heavy breaths and grunts.

I was never really sure what I wanted out of a career, Naomi said. And I'm still not. I didn't even really want to go to college, but my mother made me. Even clearly running at a slower pace, Naomi was always a few steps ahead of Leslie. He watched the back of her head as they ran. My mother wanted me to be a teacher, but I don't like kids. Adults are easier. Working at the hotel is nice for now. I like solving problems. Leslie watched Naomi fix the bun of dark

hair without breaking pace. He stared at her deft fingers working at the back of her skull with her arms raised and bent at the elbow, making the shape of triangular wings extending from either side of her head, flapping as her body twisted slightly back and forth with the motion of her running. I don't dislike all kids. My sister as a daughter, and I love her to pieces. But I still feel like a child most days. From behind, Naomi didn't look like she was running away from Leslie, but that she was guiding him somewhere.

The next morning, her father answered the phone when she called. She told him about her date, and he told her that the man sounded like he wasn't good enough, and she laughed. She asked how he was doing and he said oh you know. She tried to tell from his voice where he was living now. Ramona had said he was in Montana for a while. Naomi had stopped asking, not because she didn't care, but because every time she did, he said some place further and further away. She didn't ask where he was because it sounded too much like when are you coming back. Naomi left it alone, so long as he picked up the phone. I think like him a lot, Dad, she said, and on the other end of the line, she heard laughter.

Neither of them made it to the Cuban bar. The date was never scheduled, and the day passed by inconsequentially, like any other Thursday in September. When Leslie's parents came to visit unexpectedly during the holiday weekend, they did not stay at the Swissotel, but instead at The Embassy or The Drake. Naomi did not work at the front desk of The Embassy or The Drake, and Leslie did not find himself waiting in the lobby of the Swissotel, waiting for his mother to drop another handful of shopping bags or change into another outfit. He did not see Naomi standing behind the desk, beautifully bored, her face placid and unwavering like the lake

waters on calm summer days, wearing a navy skirt suit, stiff and starched. He was not compelled to take her away from there. Instead, there was another woman at a different front desk, easily as bored, and Leslie found himself easily as compelled, and that following Thursday they found themselves at a sports bar or the pier or a movie theatre. Leslie thought that this woman was charming and beautiful, someone that he couldn't keep up with, so he fell in love with her.

Naomi had gotten the time off she requested, and she was able to spend the holiday weekend with her mother, her sister, and her one-year-old niece. She went on runs with Ramona in the mornings through familiar streets, and they talked about how little they were sleeping lately, and how nursing felt, the new aches and pains were finding in their bodies every day. Ramona played this game where, whenever she was complaining about her baby, she referred to her as Naomi's daughter. Your daughter is keeping me up all night. I think your daughter screamed for eight hours straight today. You should see the shit your daughter produces. Sometimes, she did it with the good stuff too. Your daughter has the most beautiful smile. Your daughter breaks my heart when she laughs. Your daughter is so curious. Ramona asked if Naomi still loved living in the city, and Naomi was honest and said she did, that even if she was lonely, the city felt so full to her. At night, in her apartment, her neighbors fought or practiced piano or watched war movies with the volume turned up and Naomi felt like they are her family. Ramona told her she had a real family here, and Naomi said, I know, and Ramona said, I know you know. Naomi had only left the city a few times since she moved there. Christmas, her mother's birthday, her niece's birth. She knew she was young for thinking this, but every time, she was surprised by how much life happened away from her Chicago. Ramona and Naomi finished their run with stretches in the front lawn of their childhood home. When Ramona was leaning over to the touch her toes, Naomi gave her the slightest shove and down she went on the grass. Naomi

laugh. Ramona got up and pushed her back. Naomi grabbed her arm and they both went down. They giggled in the grass and they were girls again.

Do you want kids? Naomi asked, across another margarita at the new taco place she had heard about from a coworker. The walls were painted with large brush strokes of warm red paint that looked deliberately unfinished. I want them as much as air, he said, I especially want sons. She rolled her eyes and said, me too. He said, I want my sons to have strong, masculine names. Absolutely nothing even remotely unisex. I want them to know they are boys. Naomi plucked two molars from her mouth and offered them up to Leslie in the dim light. He inspected them, nodded his approval, and she placed them gently back in her mouth. When they did have children, they had two boys, and Naomi gave them unisex names. Robin, her favorite bird, and Riley, the brother she would have wanted for herself.

Leslie and Naomi met at the Cuban bar on the Thursday before Labor Day weekend. They talked about their families, the weather, and their jobs. They left an hour and a half later, neither of them feeling particularly changed. Naomi had asked Leslie to call, and Leslie had said he would, but neither meant what they said. No one called and no one answered.

Again, it was the week after Labor Day, and they happened to exit the train at the Western stop of the Blue Line at the same time. A year's worth of months and days had passed, but Naomi smiled when she saw Leslie, and asked if he wanted to get a drink. They walked to a bar that also served bowls of hot noodles. They talked about their families, the weather, their jobs. Naomi was thinking about leaving Chicago. Two years at the Swissotel and she was still at the front desk. She was looking for life to either speed up or slow down. Her current pace was

unsatisfying, felt too much like a drudge, and she was even considering moving back home, getting that teaching license her mother was always talking about. Leslie told her she should stay, and that was enough for Naomi. She got an office manager job at a fancy law firm downtown, across the street from the hotel, and started taking paralegal classes at night. Leslie worked in various kitchens across the city, a new one every ten months or so. Leslie and Naomi dated for three years and split up when she finished her classes. Her life had sped up so much, and it felt like his was the same, this cycle of finding a new job, all the glowing perks, all the excitement he brought home in takeout boxes, until the inevitable slip-up, or sideways comment he didn't like, or just general apathy for the service industry. The pendulum of their relationship swung from the heights of satisfaction and comfort to the depths of restriction and vapidity, and Naomi was trying to do better. To her, Leslie now seemed antithetical to the life she wanted, to the life he had helped her build. Leslie said he thought that was unfair but was tired of trying to fit himself into Naomi's life anymore. He barely saw her, and when he did, he felt like he was meeting someone new every time. Their breakup was difficult and all-consuming, droned on for months due to Leslie's inability to find an apartment for himself. When it was finally over, and Leslie was standing in her apartment door with his final box of things, Naomi thanked him for asking her to stay when he did.

My life would be totally different if I didn't run into on the train that day, she said. That's worth something I think. Leslie smiled and was opening his mouth to reply as Naomi said goodbye and closed the door.

Leslie invited Naomi over to his place for dinner. He had a studio apartment on the third floor of a converted townhouse in Wrigleyville. I'm a cook, he said, so I thought I'd show you

what I can do. She stood in his living room that was also his bedroom and drank the wine she brought with her. She watched him spin and pivot between the narrow counters of his galley kitchen, like a leaf caught in a river's current. He made pan-seared salmon with roasted vegetables, on a bed of warm, wild rice, and they ate picnic-style, on bath towels at the foot of his bed with a single candle burning between them. When they were done, they left the dishes on the floor, and climbed into his bed together, full of one another. Their skin was warm everywhere they touched and their sweat mixed into the sheets.

Leslie laid on top of her, his head on her chest, as she pulled her fingers through his curly hair. When she was sure he was asleep, she slipped out of bed just for a moment to blow out the candle that was still lit on the floor. Naomi was afraid it would spill over and that the whole apartment would go up in flames and she would be too comfortable there, with Leslie's body pressing down on her and the bed pressing up beneath her, to do anything but burn.

On a Thursday in September, they met at a Cuban bar and talked about their families, their jobs, the weather. They talked so long that when they left, it was a Saturday in December and all the summer sun had faded into a matte grey sky. They walked from the Cuban bar down to the free women's clinic, and a doctor performed an ultrasound that now thrice confirmed their pregnancy. After, they took a train, and walked down along the lake. They debated what to do in silence, walking back and forth along the paved path, Naomi in front, Leslie behind. It was already so cold, colder than it should have been. Where the lake met the raised, concrete edge of the city, these phenomenal balls of ice had formed. They were made when the lake surface froze, and then broke up into pieces by gentle waves, and then froze over again, and then repeated. These chunks of ice rocked against one another until they formed imperfect spheres, from as

small as a marble to larger than a human head. The whole shore looked like waves of grey stones, and when each one knocked into the next, they made a dense, hollow sound, like bells without clappers, and all of it sounded like an arhythmic chorus of broken bells, so unlike the new heartbeat they had just heard.

Leslie and Naomi took the river taxi down to Chinatown. Did you know the river used the flow in the other direction? Yes, of course. It used to flow out into Lake Michigan. I said I know. Now it flows down to the Mississippi. They changed the direction of its flow so that our waste wouldn't go out into the lake and then back into our drinking water. Where does our waste go now? Somewhere near St. Louis, I think. In Chinatown, they bought dumplings, sweet and sour chicken, and stir-fried bok choy. They shared everything besides their own little bowls of rice. They took the train back north, instead of the river taxi. The Chinatown station is elevated above the streets. Heading north, the tracks descend below the river. In the dark, they lost each other. When they reemerged on the elevated tracks, Leslie was headed north and Naomi was headed west.

From the hotel's front desk, Naomi could see out the revolving glass doors onto Wacker Drive. The sidewalks were constantly full, men and women who worked in finance or law or technology, tourists, shoppers, and then Naomi saw herself walk by. A woman wearing her clothes with her haircut. She was holding something in her arms and looking over her shoulders. Naomi left the desk and walked onto the street. She saw the woman take the stairs down to the Riverwalk. Naomi followed. They walked under Michigan Avenue, and then Wabash, and then State Street. Naomi kept her distance; she didn't know who she was following or even really

why. The woman kept looking over her shoulder, but never saw Naomi. At Clark Street, the woman climbed stairs back up to street level to cross the bridge across the river. Naomi stayed down on the Riverwalk and watched the woman walk above. She was wearing a jean jacket her sister had bought her for her birthday last summer. At the center of the bridge, the woman stopped, took what she was holding and held it out in front of her, over the edge of the bridge. Only as the woman was letting go did Naomi see that it was a child.

Leslie took Naomi to a movie theatre. They ate popcorn and drank sodas. On the screen, their entire lives played out on the screen for each other to see. Joyful parts, sorrowful scenes, but mostly it was dark shots of them sleeping, or not sleeping, lying there in bed. When a particular awkward scene occurred, each of them tried to explain, but the ushers would come down the aisle to shush them. The movie ended before either character met the other. Outside under the marquee lights, Leslie asked Naomi what she thought.

I liked it, I think. That woman though…

I liked her, but that man…

It's hard to judge, even knowing…

Would you see it again?

I think I would. Would you?

Maybe if the time was right.

Of course.

When Leslie kissed Naomi, she could taste the butter from the popcorn on his lips. My lips must taste the same, she thought. Already, the night was dark but the streets were still full, everyone going to the next place, or the next place, before they went home.

Naomi gave birth alone. It was earlier than they expected. It was the middle of the night and Leslie was at work. The kitchen phone line was dead. Naomi took a cab downtown to Northwestern Hospital. Please don't have the baby in my cab, ma'am. Please, no baby in the cab. At the hospital, the nurse at reception tried to turn her away. You just don't look like a woman in labor. When the next contraction swept through her body, from her toes to her shoulders, Naomi let out a groan that was louder than usual for her. What does a woman in labor look like? Her sister was on her way but it was a two-and-a-half-hour drive. Still, no one could reach Leslie. No one apologized to Naomi. The baby was coming.

Naomi and Leslie hadn't decided on names, but Leslie had said if it was a boy, absolutely nothing unisex. They didn't know the sex of the baby. Naomi was sure they were having a girl, but two nights ago, somewhere in the two hours where she actually fell asleep, she dreamt of a school and in every desk there was a little naked baby boy. When Naomi gave birth to her son, she was alone, and she named him Robin. Ramona arrived later, and then Leslie too, and everyone was happy. Already Leslie was calling him Robbie. The delivery room was full now, Robin was here, and Naomi was falling asleep, but for forty-five minutes, it had just been her and her baby boy. They had been the only things in the world for less than an hour.

The next morning, Naomi called her father and he didn't answer. She left him a message. She was pregnant. She married Leslie in March, and her father walked her down the aisle. Later, when they were dancing, her father told her about his own wedding day. Naomi listened, let all his words soak her department store dress.

Every woman who walked through the door looked like Naomi to Leslie. She was late. She not usually like this, he said the bartender. Leslie didn't know what she was like. He only knew the syllables of her first name. *Nay-oh-me*. Saying her name again and again brought him pleasure. He imagined whispering it in her ear. Leslie finished his beer, and the bartender asked if he wanted another. He asked for a shot of tequila instead. And then another. And then another. And there was Naomi, seated beside him, and the story of a rude guest at the hotel, and a late train. It's so busy out here tonight, Naomi said, and she turned to face the street. She ordered a beer and Leslie let her talk about her day. Soon, it was clear that he was drunk. I thought you weren't coming. I thought I had made a mistake. He wanted to get out of the bar, out onto the street where a gust of wind might sober him up. I want to go out there, he said, and pointed past the window. He couldn't tell if Naomi was angry or scared or both. She set down cash for her beer, and walked outside. Leslie fumbled with his wallet, paid for his beers and shots, and when he made it out the door, Naomi was gone.

After the ultrasound, Naomi and Leslie heard the heartbeat everywhere, and with each double-tick it made, time passed in indiscriminate amounts. *Thum-thum*. A wedding. *Thum-thum*. Moving in together. *Thum-thum*. A baby. *Thum-thum*. A promotion. *Thum-thum*. A lay-off. *Thum-thum*. Another baby. Now, their lives were measured in two sets of heartbeats and everything picked up pace. There were four of them now: Leslie, Naomi, Robin, and Riley. Leslie made sure that every day he held them all in his arms at the same time, for just a moment, to be wrapped around them for as long as Naomi had time, for as long as the boys could sit still.

Chicago was a city that met you at every threshold, on every windowsill, and there had been a time when Leslie and Naomi were excited to meet it in return. Now, a family of

four in a one-bedroom apartment, the city was only a suffocation. The heartbeats carried on. Leslie bought an old car off his parents, saying he would find his family their home and return for them. He drove to big cities and small towns, through Ohio, Kentucky, Missouri, and Indiana. He interviewed for jobs in kitchens, bars, factories, packaging centers, schools, sports stadiums, and hospitals.

He returned to Chicago with a moving trailer and asked Naomi, how do you like Indianapolis? I got a job at a restaurant downtown.

Naomi, who cared more for her husband's enthusiasm than she did for Indiana, said that Indianapolis could work. When they crossed state lines, they crossed into a world that was entirely their own. Naomi found an office manager position for a team of accountants, and they put a down payment on a house with a tree out front, in a suburb just outside the city where all the streets were named after horses: Mustang Court, Palomino Drive, Arabian Way. The kitchen was painted yellow with a large island counter in the middle that was straight back from the front door. They bought stools to sit at that counter and when they were tired, Naomi and Leslie sat there and pretended it was a Cuban bar.

Do you want kids? Naomi asked.

Oh definitely, Leslie said with a laugh.

I want boys only.

Me too.

With strong, masculine names.

Nothing even remotely unisex.

Never.

After pretending, they climbed the stairs to their bedroom and dreamt of possibilities. It all happened so fast, and it was all still there: the house on a half-acre, in a suburb with streets named after horses, two boys with unisex names, Leslie, who was sure that it would not happen, and Naomi, certain it would. The heartbeats carried on.

Leslie and Naomi met at a Cuban bar in Lincoln Park. They talked about their families, their jobs, and the weather. They laughed at each other's jokes and slowly their bodies moved closer and closer together. The sun set and it was night. The lights in the bar dimmed. When Leslie and Naomi looked up, the entire bar was still full, and at every table there was a Leslie and across from him was a Naomi. Some Leslies had their sleeves rolled up and some Naomis wore their hair down. At every table, they were telling the same stories in a different order. Couples laughed at different times around the room, but it was the same laughter, the same sound. Some sat with the backs upright; others leaned in towards each other. Bartenders moved between the identical couples with trays of cold, wet beers. Naomi and Leslie got up from their seats at the bar and made their way to the door. On their way out, they passed another Leslie and Naomi who took their open seats the bar. They ordered two beers, and started talking.

Sleeping Bear Dunes

We wanted out. Inside, it was dark and warm. We wanted to take those ragged breaths of night air, inhales sharp enough to shred our throats. We wanted out the tent and out of our skins. We peeled back the tent flaps, and if we could, we would have peeled off our skin there, too, and left it in our sleeping bags. We couldn't sleep like this, not when our skin felt this tight, and air in our tent was this hot. Outside, it was cold and bright under the moon and stars. We took deep breaths and stifled our screams.

Mom and Dad slept in their own tent just a few feet away. Let them sleep, we said with our breaths. We walked on our toes, out of our campsite, across the campground, to the trail that led down to Lake Michigan. We wanted to go down that trail and so we did. We knew what we were doing. We knew where to step to avoid the thick roots and where to duck our heads away from the low hanging branches. With our feet, we could feel where the path changed from dirt to sand, and we could hear where the clustered woods thinned out to individual trees as we approached the open sand dunes. The darkness in the woods was colorless and quiet, but across the dunes, that same darkness became bright and blue. There was a half moon and stars making their shapes in the sky. The occasional cloud pulled itself thin between us and the blue dome. We crested across the last sand dune and descended down to the shore. The water was calm, but not still. The waves were gentle, rocking the shore to sleep. We walked to the water's edge and let the cool water kiss the tips of our toes. We knew where the water was in all the places it reflected back the light from the moon and the stars. Further out, we couldn't tell where the sky stopped and the water began. It all looked like a sheet that had been pulled underneath itself, so that the horizon wasn't some distant line out there but that it actually came up to where we were

standing, like the line between Earth and sky was at our feet. We wanted out and we had found it. Out here, we could peel away our skin and let it fall into the water.

It didn't matter which brother we were in the dark. We were both here. What one of us said, the other heard, and so it was both of us who were doing the speaking and the listening. We were two years apart in age. One of us was eight and one of us was six. One of us was short for our age and the other one was tall; we were the same height. We had the same skin and our nose turned in the same direction. Mom cut our hair with the same pair of scissors. We didn't look like twins or like copies; we looked like one person. We looked like one person who had split himself into two. That wasn't the same thing as looking identical or looking similar. We looked the same because we were the same. Somedays the older brother was called Robin and somedays the older brother was called Riley. Somedays we were both the younger brother. Somedays we didn't answer to either name. We were the same person named Richard or Brad or Atticus. Somedays we didn't have a name at all and in the space where we would call out to one another, we made O-shapes with our mouths or copied the birds. *Chick-a-dee-dee-dee, chick-a-dee-dee-dee*.

We wanted out all the time. We wanted out of our beds and out of our house. We wanted to be out in that darkness rather than to stay in our beds, where all the quiet was. The quiet made us think. Thinking was not the same thing as knowing. Knowing was sure and solid. Thinking meant walking through a wild landscape we had never been before. In bed, in the dark, in the quiet, we would think about our eyes and how they worked. Or we would think about our fingers and what it was like to feel them squeeze around our own wrists. We would think about what it meant to have eyes and fingers and bodies, and to have our bodies specifically. We would think about what it was like to be awake, what it was like to be awake as one person split in two, and

not, for instance, what it was like to be two brothers who looked a lot alike. We would think about how different things would be if we were separate beings, maybe not even brothers anymore, but instead sisters, or dogs, or two strands of dune grass that bent in opposite directions. We didn't like doing all that thinking. We wanted to be out in the darkness where we didn't have to be different people who thought about things like that. We could just be the same person who knew things and wanted out. Mom would find us sitting at the top of the stairs or outside standing under the tree in our front yard. We didn't know how to say what we were thinking about. We didn't know why it was so scary. So we said different things.

Mom, we're afraid of the Big Bang.

Mom, we're afraid of the meteor that killed the dinosaurs.

Mom, we're afraid of the chicken and the egg.

Mom, we're afraid of being born again.

She said, boys, you should be sleeping.

She said, boys, it's the middle of the night.

She said, boys, there's nothing you can do about that.

She said, boys, maybe you were sleepwalking.

It sounded right to us. We were walking around the house or outside in the grass or down to the beach, and everyone else was asleep. Everyone's sleep hung in the air like a fog and we were out there walking through it, and everyone's sleep clung to our arms and legs like dew or sweat. We were sleepwalkers.

During the day, we got our sunburns down at the beach, so we came down here to give it back. Browns boys don't burn! Brown boys don't burn! We yelled at Mom when she told us

to put on sunscreen. We never remembered. Mom shrugged her shoulders and went to swim out in the lake for a while. She told us to stay on the beach, and occasionally we would see her arms coming over the waterline and cutting back down. She swam back and forth, parallel to the shoreline, circling us like a fish looking for food. We stayed on the beach and built sandcastles. We pretended we were giants and destroyed each other's creations until it was just flat, wet sand again. Then we built new ones and destroyed those, too. We didn't put on sunscreen, even when our skin started prickle. We were brown boys and we didn't burn. We wanted to be dark, like Dad was in the summer, but it never worked that way. By the time we were walking back to the campsite, our skin was red and taut, like the skin of ripe fruit. Everywhere we touched it, everywhere it moved and stretched, our skin felt like it was being torn away from our bodies. Every time we complained, Mom just huffed her breath. We knew she would never say I told you so, but that was only because everyone knew it. Mom didn't say things that everyone knew. It would have been a waste of words.

Dad stayed at the campsite when we went to the beach and slept through most of the day. He was awake when we came back, and when he saw us, not brown boys, but burnt boys, he grabbed towels, quarters, and a green bottle of aloe gel. The three of us walked down to the showers. Dad put in the quarters to start the water and started taking off his clothes. We took off our swim trunks. When it was warm enough, he rotated all three of us under the hot water, like pieces of a carousel under a waterfall. He ran his fingers through our hair to make sure all the sand got out and brushed away any grains that still stuck to our skin. Everywhere he touched us, it hurt. Everything burned and we were grateful that the shower hid our tears. While he rinsed himself, we looked at Dad's tan backside and saw where it faded darker down across his thighs and up his back. On the lower part of his legs, and across his face, shoulders, and arms, his

skin was the color of wet dirt. That was what we wanted: skin so dark that it looked like it came from the ground.

When the water turned off, Dad patted us dry as lightly as he could and spread the aloe all over our bodies.

You should have listened to your mom, he said.

But brown boys don't burn! We howled like dogs. We want to be dark like you!

But you have white skin, Dad said. White skin that burns.

Where? Where do we have white skin? We began looking all over our bodies, trying to find it. We lifted each other's arms and looked in our armpits. We held up our feet to one another and checked our soles. We looked down at each other's privates. It was lighter, sure, but we wouldn't call it white. We knew our colors.

It's right here, Dad said, and he pushed his thumbs hard into our burnt shoulders until we yelped like animals caught in a trap.

It's right here, underneath, side-by-side, he said. You've got a brown dad and a white mom, so you've got brown skin with a little white in it, too.

We didn't say anything else, because we had started crying again from the pain, quietly to ourselves. Dad kept covering us with the aloe without saying anything else. The aloe smelled like medicine and felt like thick paint being spread across our bodies.

Your skin will be darker when all this peels, Dad finally said. We smiled at that and wiped away our tears as gently as we could.

We were out on the beach at night, trying to give back our sunburnt skin. No, thank you, we said, while we peeled away our sunburns and letting the flaky pieces fall back into the sand

and water. We got carried away and kept peeling. One of us was being funny and put a piece of skin in his mouth. The other one was being funny, too, and did the same thing. We thought this is how we would always be the same person, by eating each other's skin. We peeled off as much of our skins as we could, swallowed some pieces, let other ones fall away. The skin underneath was soft and new and a little bit darker. Not as dark as Dad, but as close as we could get.

These were not the first pieces of a body we had left on this shore. When we came here the first time, we were so young we barely remembered. Our family was the largest we had ever seen it; there were people there we didn't even know. We were all here because Grandpa had died. He had been cremated, which was a word we didn't understand yet. We thought it sounded like maybe he had been turned to stone. Someone came around and gave everyone little handfuls of soft, white sand. We held them in our hands as if we were cupping water. Somehow, this was Grandpa, but it didn't look him. Someone said Grandpa loved this beach, loved these dunes, loved this lake, and he wanted to be here forever. Everyone took their handfuls and waded out into the water. The sun was setting and the water was orange. We were the youngest, confused about what everyone was doing, and we just stood together. We didn't know how to get from here to there. We had our handfuls, sure, but we didn't really know. We didn't know what it meant, how someone could become a handful of sand or what it meant to leave someone somewhere forever. What we did know is that we didn't want him to get inside of us. We didn't want to breathe him in, so we held our breath with big, puffed cheeks. When we finally walked into the water, we didn't want to throw him up over our heads the way we sometimes did with wet sand when we were playing, because when we did that, the sand came right back down and got stuck in our hair or in our eyes, and we didn't want Grandpa to get stuck there. And no one was really throwing him around like that anyways. Our whole family stood in the orange water,

everyone keeping their distance, as if by being far enough away from one another we might not hear each other crying. We were standing in our own lakes. Our aunt and uncle, and our cousins, and Grandma, and Mom and Dad. They were in front of us. Dad kept trying to get close to Mom but she waded out farther than anyone else, until the water was up to her waist. She wanted out. We stayed where the water only passed above our ankles, and when we finally let our handfuls of Grandpa fall into the water, the small waves lapped him back across our feet, and he got stuck there for a second. We looked up to Mom then, because we were worried we did something wrong, that there was a problem with him being stuck to our feet like that, but we couldn't say anything because Mom was crying, or something like crying. It was this awful wide-open sound that was low and close to the ground and even though her back was to us, we could see by the shape of her arms that she was pressing her handful of Grandpa into her chest, and he was falling down her front and into the water. When we looked down at our feet again, Grandpa was gone.

When everyone had left their handfuls of Grandpa out in the water, we all walked back to the shore and someone told us the story of the Sleeping Bear for the first time. While the sun was setting, someone told us that a mother bear and her two cubs swam across Lake Michigan to avoid a forest fire. The mother bear made it across but her cubs did not. She waited for them on this shore for so long that she fell asleep. The spirits knew how much she loved her cubs, and they covered her in blankets of sand and turned her into a sand dune. The spirits turned her cubs into two small islands out in the bay, where the mother bear could watch them forever from where she slept. Someone said love made this land and now Grandpa was sleeping with the mother bear and her two cubs. Now Grandpa had been turned into sand and water and land.

Sometimes, it freaked us out to think about Grandpa sleeping here forever, where we built sandcastles and where Mom swam and where the sun burnt our skin instead of making us

darker. We went sleepwalking and peeled away our sunburns and left it for Grandpa in the water, so he would know we were the same person and that we had been here with him, because we were too afraid to stay anywhere forever. We knew, because we were sleepwalkers who didn't like to do much thinking, that we would never lay down our heads and no spirits would cover us in blankets of sand. It sounded good enough for everyone else, but we knew better. We wanted out.

The Fox Skull Trio

The boy dreamed himself a fox and he was running through the woods. Behind him were the sounds of angry voices, stomping feet, and the roar of torches; in front of him was the shadow of his own animal body, made large against the forest floor. The fox knew he was being chased and he knew the people that were hunting him. He knew them by the sound of their feet on the earth. He knew them by the way they had chased away other wild animals. He knew the only way to escape the woods is to run. The only way to escape the dream is to wake up.

The boy dreamed the whole world was a fox, curled up in its sleep, with its snout tucked into its center. The People lived on its back among its red, bristly hairs that were actually trees grown in straight lines. The People didn't know that they lived on a fox-who-was-the-whole-world, and they still hunted the boy. The People knew what dreaming could do. The boy ran all over the fox-world's back, trying to find the center of the world. If he could lead the People down into the center, the fox-who-was-the-whole-world would open its jaws that were the size of mountains and swallow the People in one clean snap. As the boy ran, he stomped his feet hard against the ground, hoping the world would wake up, that the fox-who-was-the-whole-world would save the boy. The boy knew that the world would save him because the boy and the world were the same.

The fox dreamed himself a boy with ten pink fingers and ten brown toes. He ran through the woods behind his grandparents' house on two legs behind his older brother. The trees in these woods were thin and tall with very few branches below the canopy. They were planted in lines like crops and running between them was like moving through a kaleidoscope of corridors. Each

step forward showed the boy another clean passageway he could run down, countless hallways that led to no rooms, just more lines. His brother ran ahead, bounded between the trees, switching lanes and directions erratically, laughing from just the act of moving, from just the joy of going from here to there. The boy laughed too but was afraid he would lose his brother. The gap stretched further and further between them, but as far apart as they became, they were never out of sight of each other. There was nowhere to hide in the parallel woods; everything was always straight ahead. The boy and his brother were together again when they came across a set of train tracks that cut through the trees. They stepped onto the tracks, turned their heads to look down both directions, and saw nothing but clean lines. They walked down the tracks, heel to toe, balancing on the two raised beams, holding hands over the middle. The boy stopped when he saw a small skull resting in front of his feet on his side of the tracks. His brother stopped too, and the pair stared for a while. There wasn't a speck of flesh or fur left on the skull. Besides the fact that it was missing its bottom jaw, it was pristine. Every tooth was perfectly intact. The boy thought maybe it wasn't even real. Sitting there on the raised beam of the train tracks, the skull looked like it had been left there for them. The boy's brother said it must be a fox skull, because of how small it was, just barely bigger than the size of the boy's fist with two large, sharp teeth towards the front. The boy had never seen a skull before, or even a real bone that hadn't belonged to a cooked chicken or turkey and was surprised to see that it wasn't perfectly white like he had thought. This skull was more of a cream color, slightly warm in tone, soft even. He reached out to pick it up, ignoring his older brother's protests about germs and dead things. Holding the skull in his hands, the boy knew that it was a real skull, that it was so much its true self that it had merely seemed inauthentic. It was dense in his hands. He traced his thumb down from the peak of the head to the jagged opening at the end of the snout. The boy lifted the skull

up so that he was looking into the place where the fox's eyes had been. The boy knew the fox was a predator. The eyes may face forward, and the teeth may be sharp, but look at how small this deadly skull was. The boy thought, *I have one of these inside of me. Not just a skull, but a fox skull. No one knows I am also a fox.* The boy carried the skull back to his grandparents' house, showed everyone there, let them look at the cream fox skull with their milky people eyes. His mother was mortified. His father said the boy could keep it. The fox never woke from the dream.

Awake, Again (an excerpt)

Three days after giving birth to her daughter, Ursula woke up for the last time. Here the story starts over. Here the story begins again. The durations of her sleep had lessened and lessened over the final months of her pregnancy. First, it was only a couple of hours a night. Then, it was only in twenty-minute bursts throughout the day and night. In her last month before Agnes, she would drift off every time she closed her eyes: on the bus, standing in line at the grocery store, cooking at the stove. Ursula expressed her concerns regarding her sleeplessness to her doctor, who assured her this was a normal symptom of her pregnancy. The last time Ursula fell asleep, she was already home with baby Agnes. Emil had already gone back to work. Agnes had fallen asleep in her arms, and while Ursula took three steps from the edge of her bed to the bassinet by the window, she fell asleep. It was all of thirty seconds, somewhere between the first and second step. When she awoke, standing alone in her room, she looked down at the baby in her arms. She traced one thumb over Agnes' papery eyelids and down the tip of her nose. If Ursula had stayed asleep perhaps even two seconds longer, she was sure that she and her newborn daughter would have crashed down into the floor. Ultimately, Ursula knew she would never sleep again regardless of how she felt about the matter, but she made a promise then in order to commit to herself that whatever this was, this symptom of her life, was something she had chosen, and something she would choose over and over again.

CD's notes for future writing: this story is incomplete, but Micheline suggested I include notes for stories that are not yet in the book so that you can see where some holes will be filled. I will be brief; this story follows Ursula, grandmother to Naomi, "the first insomniac," who is diagnosed with fatal familial insomnia and lives many years without sleeping. The story would be rotational, starting over and over again, following the premise that, since she lacks the ability to bracket her days because she is not sleeping, her sense of time is lost. Past is present, future is past, etc.

II.

Counting Geese

(an excerpt)

THE LOVERS

There is the patch of grass. There are the trees that group themselves into woods on the edge of the clearing. There is the chorus of winds that blow through from the west. There are the nesting birds and their rituals. There are the bison that pass through and the wolves that follow, the tracks and the trackers. Somewhere, within those trees, there is the den of the black bear who will return, and beyond the woods, there is the creek with the beaver, the eel, and the trout. There is that close star that the grasses, ferns, and trees lean towards. There are the glaciers that migrated across from the north and flattened this land, crushing soft stone into cool soil. Further south, they will stop, come up against harder rock, and melt. Their water will cut itself into the land and freeze again, cracking open into ravines and caves. But here, they pass quietly, leave behind sediments from their travels, and the land becomes, for the first time, rich.

The lovers step out of the trees. The sun is warm on their skin after walking through the cool woods. Winter has melted off, and spring has taken root. There are flowers blooming at the seam where the clearing meets the trees. There is the patch of grass. The lovers know these grasses and the grasses know them. The lovers know the grasses by the small eruptions they grow in, vibrantly green stems that burst out from the base. They know in late summer, the stems will bloom into cream, pink, and tan and smell faintly of spice. And in the fall, the blooms will catch fire, alight into gold and yellow, before falling away. The lovers know now, in spring when the grasses are young, how soft they can be. The grass is brushing against their legs as they walk. This is the first time that the lovers are in this clearing and already they see an indentation of their own bodies there in the grass.

There are the lovers lying there in the grass. There are pieces of dried fish and berries they pull from the pouches on their waists. There is the name for their people, which means wanderer. There is the language they pass between themselves, spoken over the grasses, who are also listening. To the lovers, language is not a resource or commodity that has grown scarce. It is the line between two things, between lover and lover, between lover and fish, fish and water, water and soil, and soil and grass. It is the two lovers lying there in the grass.

There are the lovers standing and resuming their walk north. There are the outlines of their bodies in the grass and their language in the soil. There is this patch of grass that will bloom and burst and sleep beneath the snow and erupt again. There is the grass that keeps the language of lovers in its roots, and there are the mites and ants that live alongside them. There are the squirrels and foxes that run above. There are battles, and there are arrowheads and bullet casings left in the ground. There are the people walking above, east to west. There is the felling of the trees and the making of fields. There are the growers of corn, wheat, oats, and barley. There is the idea of commerce and the selling of land. There is the pig farmer and the pig farmer's son and the son of the pig farmer's son. There is the drawing of lines, the notion of statehood. The state is named Indiana, the Land of Indians, and it is not named the Land of Wanderers or the Land of Language or the Land of Grass. There is the city being born just to the south, that has not yet reached the forgotten clearing. There is that growing city along the river, and there are the men who return from faraway wars and no longer wish to live on top of each other in rooms the shape of bricks, who long for clearings again. There are the governing bodies, bodies with no skin and no warmth, who use language and smaller bodies to create wide roads that connect their cities together. There is the son of the pig farmer's son and there is the selling again. There are words like zoning and development and subsidize. There is the land that is empty for a breath

before the people must recreate what was once there. There are no lovers, no one to speak the language of grasses, and no one remembers where the trees took root or how wide the creek was or that the grass used to grow in a collection of eruptions, not in flat coverings. They speak a mispronunciation of the land.

There are the lovers lying in the grass. There is the warmth of the sun and the chill of the soil. There are the beetles crawling beneath their bodies. There are the geese flying overhead that point them in the direction of their wandering. There is this clearing, and these trees, and the winds that blow through, and the glaciers that have long melted. There is an empty moment, the breath, where warm light meets cool soil, and there are the lovers lying there in the grass.

THE DEVELOPER

The developer wants to be an architect. He studies architecture in upstate New York at a reputable university and while his classmates dream of building cathedrals and skyscrapers and bridges, the developer wants to build houses. After he graduates, he works for the city of Chicago, studies the plans for old historic homes so that they can be restored. He helps reconstruct failing foundations and procures new materials to fortify the collapsing houses. He gains an expertise in building homes that will last while working across many projects at once. He is a good worker. The city of Chicago reorganizes, and the developer is put on a commission to help build new homes for the expansion of the city. He joins the commission after they have already paved the new roads and dug trenches for pipes and electricity. He is disappointed to find that it is not his job to design the homes. That has already been done by some junior architects from a firm in New York City. It is his job to take those designs and guarantee that those homes are built efficiently. He selects the materials and develops plans for the homes' quick construction. The developer has dreams of walking through stone quarries and picking slabs of limestone to be turned into tile or counter tops. He dreams of feeling planks of raw wood in his hands, testing their strength and pliability, and deciding which wood to use for floors and which to use for cupboards. Instead, he places orders for aluminum paneling and plaster that arrive in shipping containers. Instead of selecting beautiful copper piping, he has plastic shipped in from Nebraska. The lumber is bought by the ton from Wisconsin. Steel supports are manufactured in Pennsylvania and arrive like puzzle pieces. It isn't even the developers job to put the houses together. He only visits the construction site after the first few houses are built, for something called quality assurance. He checks to see if the houses are being built correctly, if the materials

he ordered are working the way they are supposed to, and he makes adjustments for the next hundred houses to be built. Then, he moves on to the next neighborhood.

The developer has been doing this work for twenty-seven years. He works for a national development company and has helped build neighborhoods in Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia. The houses vary occasionally depending on climate and city resources, but not by much. There isn't even the excitement of building homes around certain environmental factors like trees or streams or rock outcroppings, because, by the time the developer is brought onto the project, the city has already leveled the land into clear cut half-acre plots. After the homes are built, a different developer who dreams of being a landscaper decides which trees, grasses, and shrubs to replant, and they are shipped from nurseries in Kentucky and Ohio.

The developer never sees a project begin or end. He is not there when construction breaks ground nor is he there when the first residents take possession of their homes. He sits firmly in the middle, taking the work that is passed to him, completing it, before passing it on to another. A different firm designs the houses. A separate commission picks the plots of land. An independent official in the city planner's office names the streets of each neighborhood. The street names fall into the same theme. This way, residents would be able to quickly distinguish by just a street address who lives among them and who does not. The developer's first neighborhood was all flowers. Rose Street, Daisy Lane, Iris Avenue. When the temporary street signs are put in, before any of the houses have been built, the developer took his daughter and helped her sound out all the words. His wife was pregnant then, and they bought one of these new houses. They still live on Hyacinth Street, where the developer now has two daughters and a son.

The developer has built neighborhoods with streets named for different species of trees, Revolutionary War generals, famous painters, various herbs and spices, and for this new

neighborhood named for horses. Clydesdale Way, Palomino Place, Hanoverian Street, and where the developer stands now, in front of a half-complete house on Mustang Court.

This house on Mustang Court on the edge of Indianapolis is identical to the house where the developer lives on Hyacinth Street in the outskirts of Chicago. It is identical to the thousand other houses the developer has helped build. On this first house here in Indiana, the developer is running his checks. The front door is where it should be, to the right of the connected two-car garage. The door opens to a small foyer with a hallway leading directly ahead towards the kitchen. To the left is a small nook and a closet. The wood flooring has been put down in the foyer and the hallway. From where he stands, the developer can see the wood on the floors of the kitchen as well. The staircase to the right that divides the hallway from the living room is finished, but uncarpeted. The living room is as well. The glass panes have been put into the bay window at the front of the house. The oversized archway dividing the living room and dining room is complete. The swing door between the dining room and kitchen is present and working properly. The kitchen, with its window above the sink, is mostly complete. Some cabinets are missing their doors and the small hallway between the garage and the space for a kitchen table has not been insulated yet. The backdoor out to the deck is stuck, but the contractors believe they have a solution. The second floor is missing carpet as well, but the doors and door jams for all four bedrooms and two bathrooms are functional. In the basement, the workers assure him the water heater and plumbing are operational, or will be soon. There is a spray-painted rectangle where the breaker box will go, now just a clump of wires. This is acceptable to the developer. He signs off on his checklists and places them in the mail to the development office in Chicago.

Next door, the construction crew is putting up the supports for another house, identical to the one the developer just saw. On the next half-acre plot, they are marking on the ground where

to begin excavating for the basement. Each house will be identical to the one before it. They will be adorned with the same fixtures. The house numbers will be of the same design. The mailboxes will be painted the same buttercream color. The only elements that will vary will be the residents. Families of three or four or six. Some will paint their interior walls different colors. Years later, they might tear up the carpet or finish their basements. There will be a body of neighbors, a monster with twenty heads, that will keep the exteriors all looking the same, that will fine residents for having grass that is too long or holiday decorations that are too extravagant. There will always be an image to maintain, and here the developer stands, at the first stroke of the brush, the first flash of the camera.

Just under two hundred miles away, the developer's son sits at the top of the same staircase and throws his cowboy figurines down the steps. His younger daughter is reading on the carpet of the same living room. His oldest is helping his wife with dinner in the same kitchen. The developer will be home the day after tomorrow, and will hang his coat in the same closet. The humor or perhaps the allure of walking through hundreds of copies of the very home he lives in is long lost on the developer. He still wishes for the historic homes of his youth, to wrap his hand around the beveled stair railing, and to look up at the unique crown molding where the wall meets the ceiling. The developer is only ever in the middle of such processes of recreation, of redistributing the same dream he has created a thousand times over.

THE TREE

The tree in the front yard comes from a pre-approved list. This is another choice made on another desk in another state. There is an equation. Someone must solve for X. Every third house is given a tree in its front yard. The conjoined backyards of eight or nine properties are allowed one or two trees in total, according to size, and no house with a tree in the front yard can have a tree in its backyard. The tree species must be planted in alternating patterns. The trees that can be arranged in this pattern are the elm, the spruce, and the maple. Once a selection has been made, juvenile trees are collected from a nursery in Wisconsin and shipped to the neighborhood.

The tree in the front yard of 110 Mustang Court is an elm tree. It is the property's first resident, planted before even the grass seed has been spread or the garden boxes have been mulched. It has many names: the American elm, the white elm, the water elm, *Ulmus americana*. Despite the equation's limitations, most of the trees in the neighborhood are elm trees. By the early twentieth century, elms had become common choices for streets and parks due to their tolerance for urban conditions, rapid growth, and graceful form. They are hardy trees, able to withstand the conditions of tundra and deserts and everything in between. Elm wood is hard and coarse with interlacing fibers that make it difficult to chop or split. Young twigs and branches are tough and have been used for tying and binding, making ropes or whips. The elm's primary use is that of a tree: to stand tall and cast shade. American elms have been planted in Central Park in New York City and along the National Mall in Washington, D.C. In their crisp and cool shade, lovers have been reunited, armies have been halted, treaties have been signed, someone has thought better of themself and someone has thought worse.

The elm tree in the front yard is falling over. It takes years for the tree to fall all the way. The tree falls with every inch it grows towards the sky. The tree falls with every yellow-turned leaf and bursting green bud. The tree falls with every digging root and every frozen branch. When the tree is planted, it is already falling over. The tree falls when it is selected from a list and when it is planted. When the tree falls, it takes only half a day to cut apart the trunk and branches. It takes another day to remove its root system. It takes six weeks for the yard to be resodded and the new grass to grow. The tree falls just by standing in the front yard of 110 Mustang Court.

THE BLIND MAN'S WIFE

Four brothers. Two sisters. A dozen or so nieces and nephews. One father who is living. One mother who is not. One husband who is going blind. Twenty-six students. Three meals a day. Something extra on weekdays for the neighbor boys whose parents work late. There is the dusting on Thursday. The mopping on Saturday mornings, and gardening in the afternoons in spring and summer and fall. One tree in the front yard. Two flower beds at the front of the house. One in the back. The vacuum Harold got her for Christmas four years ago that she pulls out on Sundays and Wednesdays. The thirty pieces of real silverware that she only polishes before and after Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Gloria knows two recipes for fish. One for meatloaf. One for chicken a la king. Mushroom casserole and lasagna. Vegetables to steam: broccoli, squash, zucchini. Tomato slices for breakfast. White bread from the grocery store cut into twenty-six slices. A dozen eggs. Four sticks of butter. Two-pound bag of flour. One pound of sugars; brown and granulated. Two dozen chocolate chip cookies baked on Fridays for the neighbor boys. Three cookies for herself. Two for Harold. One pint of heavy cream. One teaspoon of cream of tartar. Strawberry shortcake in summer. Apple pie in autumn. Chocolate tart in winter.

Ten years in the house on Mustang Court. Another dozen before in the small red cottage in Irvington. Two years living in South Carolina while Harold's parents were dying. Ten years before in the rented bungalow in Ohio with all the ants. One year driving back and forth from Wisconsin when her sister got sick. Now, Gloria is down to one cigarette a day, that she smokes at four in the afternoon. Eighteen years growing up in Kenosha. Two years at the teachers college in Milwaukee. Thirty-seven years being married to Harold. Three pregnancies. No children. Over

eight-hundred students across thirty-four years of teaching. Two terms as secretary of the homeowners association.

Three years since Harold retired from selling insurance. Two dozen volumes of biographies from presidents, captains of industry, and war generals that he cannot read anymore. Fourteen steps he counts as he walks down the stairs. One, two, three. Two identical cardigans, one for outside, one for inside. Eighteen months before he told Gloria he was legally blind. Eighteen months that Gloria knew. She had the kitchen painted yellow as a test. He knows she had it painted, he could smell the fumes longer than she could, but not what color. Green, he thinks. Three odd places Gloria found him as he was losing his eyesight: lying down in the guest bedroom, sitting at the top of the stairs with his head against the wall, standing in front of the bay window in the living room, his face only an inch away from the glass. I can feel the sun, he said. I know it's there.

Two head injuries. Six or seven doctor visits this year. One audiologist, who said his hearing loss is average for a man of his age, but with his eye condition, something of a concern. Three visits to care centers in Indianapolis. None they like. One in Wisconsin that isn't awful. A bill they can only afford if they sell the house. One guest bedroom at her sister's place, no children, never married. No more cigarettes. One realtor with a good smile. A young widow with three daughters who is looking to buy. One kitchen painted yellow that she asks they leave as is. One moving truck, three movers. Three hundred miles from Indianapolis to Madison.

One house on Mustang Court. Four bedrooms. Two and a half bathrooms. A tree in the front yard. Ten yards of scrap carpet left in the basement. Two bags of gardening soil in the garage. A three-pack of sponges left beneath the sink in the bathroom. One box of books left in one of the bedrooms. One leaky faucet in the kitchen. Fourteen steps on the staircase. Dust in the

corners of the living room. Four circle indentations in the carpet from the legs of the dining table. One kitchen painted yellow. One key and one deadbolt locked behind her when she leaves.

THE WIDOW AND HER DAUGHTERS

The girls move in with large, black trash bags filled with clothes, bedding, and towels. The movers carry in the pair of mattresses, the kitchen table, the chairs. There are only three large boxes. One for books, one for art supplies, one for dishes, pots, and pans. There are other things they own, in other places, that will make their way to the house eventually. For the first month, the girls pull the two mattresses into the primary bedroom and the four of them sleep in a line. They giggle and snicker and stay up late talking about fairies or flowers or freckles. They tug on the sheets and kick each other in their sleep. They sleep in late and pull each other's hair when someone has been snoring too long and turn away from one warm body to be closer to another. The room smells like laundry detergent and spearmint toothpaste.

The other empty rooms become magical worlds. They pretend the dining room will be a library with bookshelves that go all the way up to the ceiling and the living room will just be filled with pillows and blankets on the floor, and beautiful pieces of fabric that they love will hang on the walls. The daughters have laid claim to the other three bedrooms and have already found the percussive power of stomping up the stairs and slamming their doors behind them. They lay on the rough carpet, extending their arms and legs into a starfish shape, and make faces out of the popcorn ceiling. They cry quietly at the bottom of their closets with the doors closed. They stand at their second-floor windows and say out loud to the empty room, I could climb down from here if I wanted to. I'm actually really good at climbing.

Anne, the widow, makes plans to use the half-finished basement for her painting. She pulls all the carpet scraps out from the crawl space and pieces them together across the concrete floor. It's enough for about half of the space. She sweeps away the cobwebs and dirt on the other

half and makes plans to buy at least four lamps to compensate the one naked bulb hanging on a wire by the washer and dryer. She goes to secondhand stores looking for these lamps and instead finds a pair of upholstered chairs, bed side tables, dressers and armoires with missing knobs and handles. Anne finds half-used cans of paint and the girls help by painting the living room green, the dining room purple, the hallway blue. They leave the yellow kitchen as is.

The daughters find their own beds and populate their rooms with their own treasures. Dorothea has a raised salon chair where she reads her books. Octavia finds a dress sewing mannequin that she decorates with permanent markers and pinned scraps of paper. Theodora has three beanbags, perhaps now only half their original volume, stacked in the corner that she uses as display for all her stuffed animals and dolls, which are methodically organized according to imagined occupation and social networks. The rooms fill over the years, but nothing is removed. Every year or so, melancholy slips into the house, and Anne calls for a change, and the girls spend all weekend reorganizing. The daughters switch rooms. They move the kitchen table to the front window and the upholstered chairs sit in the kitchen nook. They buy fabric scraps from craft stores and make new pillows and blankets. The girls, the things they have collected, the little scraps of paper or fabric or skin, spin around inside the planetary system that the house has become.

The daughters make friends at school and host parties for every birthday, every holiday, every lunar cycle, every dead pet, every report card, great or average. They practice kissing their friends first and then their boyfriends and then their girlfriends. They paint their nails and dye their hair. They hate each other. They hate themselves. They cry at the kitchen counter about girls with freckled noses and boys with armpit hair. They cry about marching band auditions and good books they don’t understand. They make promises to lose their virginity before summer’s end,

before the new year, before spring break. They trip coming down the stairs and chip their teeth. They get splinters in their bare feet from the deck. They cut themselves on accident, and they cut themselves on purpose. They yell at their mother and then crawl into her bed after midnight. They do this when they are eleven, and when they are fifteen, and when they are eighteen, and when they are twenty-two.

Anne keeps looking for those lamps for the basement. Instead of lamps, she buys clothes for the new school year, roller skates, soccer cleats, summer camps, and rents a tuba from the music shop. She buys hair dye and nail polish for herself, too. She pays for a drive-thru carwash every other Sunday. She buys a membership to the YMCA and takes dance fitness classes and brings the girls swimming in the summer. She signs up for a sewing course for herself and speaks with a counselor three times. She works in the principal's office at the girls' elementary school and picks up shifts at the craft shop when she can. She cashes the life insurance checks when they come and opens separate accounts for her daughters when they are old enough for the money their grandparents send on birthdays and Hannukah.

She doesn't find those four lamps, but she meets another woman who paints and is looking for four rugs, or four pillows, or four hours in a day. Anne invites her back to the house, to have a drink at her kitchen counter, and to show her the basement painting studio that she's never used. She and the woman fuck on the jigsaw carpet scraps on the floor. In the light of the singular light bulb that hangs above them, the shadows make geometric patterns across their bodies and flatten their faces into cubists paintings, one looking down onto another.

They are entwined like this all autumn, Anne's first autumn after her daughters have moved out of the house. Anne and the woman who paints fuck on the floor in the basement, on the floor in the kitchen, on the floor at the top of the stairs, and when they stop, Anne hates the

sound of her own breathing and chewing in that house. A charity pulls into the driveway with two trucks and loads all the furniture into the trailers. In order to hurry the sale, Anne paints all the rooms an off-white, as recommended by her realtor. The only room she doesn't paint is the kitchen, still yellow and aflame in that western sun, and if she were asked, she wouldn't be able to say why. She might say, I guess I just forgot, or I was painting this whole house white, maybe I just thought one room deserved to have some color. But in the end, she really wouldn't know, and she leaves before the problem of knowing is planted like a seed behind her eyes.

She leaves before her realtor finds another happy family of four to buy the house. She lets the realtor tell the stories of raising her daughters in that house in the neighborhood where the streets are named after horses. The realtor says all the right things about the good schools and safe streets and quaint local shops. Anne is already living in another city when the closing paperwork arrives. She signs it and asks the realtor to tell the new family she didn't mean to leave all those painting supplies in the basement, but it's there for them to do with what they wish.

THE REALTOR

After the agency realtor allowed the owners of 522 Palomino Place to sell their house for half its worth in the summer of 1982, Margaret Henderson becomes the unofficial realtor of the neighborhood. She's part of this community; she lives over on Appaloosa Street with her husband and two kids. They have lived there since Thomas was six and Rebecca was four. She has been a member of the homeowners association ever since she moved to the neighborhood and once served as its president after Leigh Cooper resigned partway through her term when she caught her husband sleeping with the gardener. Margaret plans the Halloween trick-or-treat route for the children. She organizes the canned food drive in November. In the first week of December, she drives around the neighborhood and delivers that years' official holiday wreath to every house, paid for by the yearly neighborhood dues. When the residents talk about Margaret, and they do talk, they use words like upstanding and dedicated and neighborly.

In the last nineteen years, Margaret has assisted with the buying and selling of over forty homes in the neighborhood, many of them repeats. The residents trust Margaret, mostly because they feel she has deserved their trust by being a good neighbor, but some feel they have no other choice. By being the unofficial realtor for the neighborhood, Margaret has become wealthy in information. Margaret knows which families have three or more pets, which is in direct violation of the homeowners association guidelines. She knows which residents keep one room as a shrine to a certain runway model and which ones use their basements for sex parties. While each house is designed to be identical to the one beside it, Margaret knows who tore down the wall between two bedrooms, who has upgraded their kitchen with fancy appliances from France, and who, God forbid, has put green shag carpet down in the living room. While she has never violated her

own realtor code of conduct and revealed such information to the neighborhood, she has, on occasion, reminded people of what she knows. Some neighbors say, in low whispers, that is how Thomas Henderson kept his position as student body president, even after getting caught breaking into the school gym to have sex with his girlfriend. Principal Evans lives over on Shetland Ave, and it was Margaret after all who sold him his house. Some say it's no coincidence Rebecca was named captain of the soccer team the year after Coach Mitchell sold his house on Hanoverian Street. They say Margaret got him $10,000 over the asking price. She is, of course, a good businesswoman.

Margaret first sells 110 Mustang Court for the O'Neills when they move to Wisconsin. They are one of the first families to buy a house here in the neighborhood after it is complete and Margaret is respectful of that kind of tradition. Margaret sees her neighborhood as a kind of holy land and each of its residents as practitioners in the faith of community. While she doesn't know Gloria and Harold personally, she knows of their generosity. Gloria watches some of the neighborhood children after school and makes extra dinners for her neighbors when they have fallen ill. It is a tremendous honor for Margaret to sell their house. While the money from the sale is needed quickly for Harold's care, Gloria privately tells Margaret she hopes the house will go to a family with children. Anne Kaplan's offer is not the highest, but it is still over asking price, and she is a widow with three beautiful daughters. The O'Neills accept and Gloria still writes Margaret a Christmas card every year that she is alive.

Once the Kaplan girls have all grown up, Anne calls Margaret and says she is looking to sell. Anne calls Margaret on a Friday, and by Monday morning, Margaret is at her door with her camera. She remembers the house from when she sold it to Anne. She remembers the house because she's sold dozens just like it. She remembers the house because she lives in a house that

is identical. She walks up and down the same stairs. She washes her dishes in the same sink. She showers in the same bathroom and pees in the same toilet. Neither the O'Neills nor the Kaplans have changed much of the original house beyond painting the walls. There is a new towel rod in the second bathroom where one of the girls pulled the original out of the wall. The shower head in the en suite has been changed out. The rest is all the same, everything Margaret already knows. Every third house in the neighborhood has a tree in the front lawn, and 110 Mustang Court has a juvenile elm tree perfectly centered between the living room's bay window and the sidewalk.

The ones with the trees sell faster, Margaret says on the phone to Anne. Better curb appeal.

At the open house, Margaret shares all the right information. Built in 1973. Great local schools. Safe streets with a neighborhood watch. An easy commute downtown or to the northside for work. Only twenty-five minutes to the airport. There is a time when a house like this would sell before Margaret could stick her realtor sign in the yard. But now there are new neighborhoods being built further north, and families are moving into nicer houses in Zionsville, Carmel, and Fishers. People aren't afraid to live further away from the city because now there are town centers and shopping malls and corporate complexes on the edge of city limits, in the counties where they can pass their own mandates and laws. And the neighborhood where the streets are named after horses is not exactly new. The cheap concrete they used to pave the streets has startled to buckled and crack under that past two decades of winters. Potholes are swallowing tires like candy. Some of the trees over on Clydesdale Ave are diseased and have to be cut down. Geese take over the central pond every spring.

But this is still a good house. Interests rates are low, the lowest they will ever be, and people need less and less money in order to purchase a home. Margaret is not worried. The right family is around the corner, she says to her husband. They always are.

Leslie and Naomi Birch tour the house on a Tuesday morning. Margaret has swept the steps, lit a scented candle, and the stereo in the kitchen is playing a CD of smooth jazz. The lilt of a clarinet is simmering through the house towards the front door.

The local public schools are some of the best in the state, Margaret says while showing them the upstairs bedrooms. People drive slow on these streets and kids bike around and play in each other's yards. Everyone keeps an eye on the kids. Your neighbors, the Cartwrights, have a basketball hoop in their driveway, and I'm sure they would let your boys play over there.

Margaret knows from her preliminary phone call with Naomi that they have two sons, Robin and Riley, who will be starting school soon. The family is moving to Indianapolis from Chicago in order to afford a better quality of life for their sons. Leslie is a cook. Naomi is an office manager. Naomi might not have said this, but Margaret knows they want the quaint neighborhood with the safe streets and the community they can rely on.

They are an attractive couple, Margaret thinks. Both Naomi and Leslie are tall with dark hair. Both of them are tan, but Leslie is darker with eyes that are almost black. The boys are at daycare today, but Naomi has shown Margaret a photo. They are beautiful, brown boys with their father's nose and their mother's eyes.

We are a multicultural community, Margaret offers down in the living room. Many African American families, and Hispanic, too. We even have another Indian family, the Banerjees, over on Palomino. Margaret can't help herself from lifting her flat hand to address Leslie.

Other kind of Indian, Leslie says, the first thing he has said during the tour. Margaret nods, not sure what he means.

This neighborhood has a home for everybody, she says.

In the end, 110 Mustang Court is only on the market for twenty-seven days. The Birches make the only offer, and Margaret convinces Anne Kaplan that it will be the best one she will receive. The house sells at the end of March, and by the beginning of May, the Birches are moving in. Margaret brings over housewarming gifts: a new candle, a loaf of freshly baked bread, a cookie baking book for Naomi, a bottle of wine for Leslie, a basketball and a deck of playing cards for the boys. She also leaves a folder of the rules and regulations of the homeowners association, along with dates for when to pay the association dues. When she drops off the gifts, she takes Naomi's hand and earnestly offers her assistance should the family ever need it.

You know where to find me. Margaret points in the direction of her house, just a few blocks away. And welcome to the neighborhood!

When Margaret pulls her sign out of the yard, she is thinking about legacy. Another family in the neighborhood, another house sold, another notch in the chain. She walks home with her sign under her arm, and says the family's name over and over again, rolls it around in her mouth like a gumball. The Birches who live on Mustang Court. The Birches on Mustang. Mr. and Mrs. Birch and their sons on Mustang Court. Leslie and Naomi and Robin and Riley who live in the same house as everyone else over on Mustang Court.

THE BIRCHES

Every house in the neighborhood is the same. What changes is the people who move through them. The Birches appear to their neighbors as another beautiful family in their collective portrait. A striking couple, both of them tall and reasonably athletic. Their two sons are energetic and well-mannered. Leslie nods and raises one arm in a wave at the neighbors walking by when he is mowing the lawn. Naomi walks any incorrectly delivered mail to the right address. The boys never leave their bikes on the sidewalk. The Birches step quietly into the neighborhood as if they have always been there.

The neighbors begin to recognize their routine. They know Naomi goes for runs in the early morning. They know that any late-night car driving down the street is probably Leslie coming home from work. They know that Naomi leaves for work by seven-thirty in the morning and that their neighbor, Mrs. Cartwright makes sure the boys make it to the bus stop every morning. They know that Leslie sleeps until the early afternoon and to not go knocking on their door until at least two o'clock. They know that Naomi has never attended a homeowners association meeting, but the Birches have never missed a payment. They know that more often than not, the check comes from a bank account that is only in Naomi's name. They know that Leslie goes through periods of not working, because there he will be, in the early evening, grilling on their back deck, or biking with his sons at dusk. No one has ever heard any yelling or arguing coming from the Birches on Mustang Court, but the neighbors so rarely see Leslie and Naomi together. They seem to move in opposite schedules. They must only ever encounter one another in the dark hours of late night and early morning.

It is not necessarily the preoccupation of the neighbors to be concerned with the happenings of 110 Mustang Court, or any other home for that matter. It is just another performance that has ensnared another audience. Each house on every street has its own dramas playing out. Stages are erected in kitchens and bedrooms, where troupes of players carry out their roles. Every resident is giving a performance of a lifetime. Movement from one room to the next is choreographed by the patterns of what has occurred and what will be. Every foot on a step has been made a thousand times over. Lighting and sound are cued on exact timetables; streetlamps alight at the same hour every evening and the voices on their stages or in the wings lower themselves into a whisper. The lights in the houses flick off on their own cues. The doors and windows are locked. The curtains are closed. Everything is dark, except for the light above the stove. The stage is set. On the kitchen counters, flowers wilt in their vases and fruits rot in their bowls.

Inside the house, where the neighbors cannot see, the Birches move through their own routines unobserved. After her runs, Naomi makes breakfast and packs lunches for the boys. After school, Robin and Riley do their homework and play backyard games until it's time for dinner. When Leslie has a job, he wakes up in the afternoon, he watches the news and eats leftovers from dinner the night before. He makes progress on his latest project around the house; he stains the deck, or regrouts the shower, or fixes the running toilet in the boys' bathroom. He smokes a cigarette in the garage. He's off to work before Naomi and the boys come home.

When he doesn't have a job, Leslie is always there. He starts larger projects around the house, installing a new washer or dryer, tearing up old carpet in the bedrooms, or putting in more energy efficient windows. He leaves his tools out and sections of the house become uninhabitable for a time. He wants to play games with the boys or have sex with his wife, but everyone is busy. There are errands to run and homework to finish, and everyone seems surprised to see Leslie, standing at the kitchen counter cutting vegetables. No matter what, Leslie always feels alone in his house. There is a restlessness in him that turns into an irritation and it ripples through the house. The air becomes dry and electric. Leslie begins slamming cupboards and doors. Naomi darts around him in the house like prey trying to avoid a predator's direct line of sight. Robin and Riley hide in their rooms until they are summoned, for dinner or for forgotten chores. Leslie yells about missing ingredients in the pantry or toys left on the stairs or about something that no one else can seem to decipher. Everyone is holding their breath, afraid to make eye contact with one family member or another. As often as Leslie will lose a job, he will find another, and eventually, the house will return to their order. Everyone just has to wait.

At night, no one can sleep. Naomi tosses and turns. She climbs out of bed and stretches her legs that always seem to ache. She counts down how many hours she has left until her alarm will go off. She makes a list of everything that has to be done tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. She dozes off for no more than an hour at a time, before she hears some noise or is awoken by one of her sons.

Robin lies in his bed and worries. He worries about why is alive and why he is who he is. He worries that maybe all of this can't be real, his dark room above the garage and the many bedrooms beyond that. He worries about dying and about something he lost a year ago and about something his father said that wasn't very nice. When he can't stand it anymore, he tiptoes over to his mother in her room and lays down all his worries in her bed. Naomi places a hand on his shoulder and guides him back to his own room. She says as calmy as she can, you have to let it all go.

Riley has nightmares and for that reason is petrified at the thought of sleep. He keeps himself awake by pulling at his hair or pinching his skin until he can stand it no longer. He drifts off into a dark world that no one believes. He screams for Naomi and says there was someone standing in the corner of the room or there were large bugs that were chasing me or I dreamed that you left me behind and everything went dark. Naomi checks under the bed and changes the sheets when she has to. She flicks all the lights on and off. She holds Riley's head in her lap while he cries until they both drift off, and when Naomi wakes up twenty minutes later, she tucks him in and goes back into her own dark world across the hall.

If Leslie is out of a job, he still likes to keep his night shift schedule. He cleans up the kitchen after everyone has gone to sleep. He watches the late-night news on mute and eats an extra helping of dessert. Eventually the tv channels play nothing but infomercials and he turns it

off. He masturbates on the couch at least twice. His wife won't have sex with him before bed because she says it will keep her up. His wife is up all night in their bedroom just above his head. The couch in the living room is directly below their bed, and Leslie masturbates while staring through the ceiling, through the carpet, through the bed into the sheets where his wife's legs and hips toss and turn in the bed they don't often share. If Leslie hears either of his sons moving around or calling for his wife, he bounds up the stairs as if in a state of emergency. He reassures his sons that he can help in whatever way Naomi would, while they beg for their mother. On particularly bad nights, the whole family of insomniacs climb into Naomi and Leslie's bed and lie in a row. One, two, three, four. No one sleeps. They listen to each other's breathing and say nothing. They wait for sleep that never comes. It feels like a race is about to begin. They are waiting for the starting gun to go off. For someone to say ready, set, go! For someone to click the stopwatch and for time to start ticking.

The insomniacs have moved into the neighborhood. This family of not-sleepers perform their routines in the light of day. They go to their jobs and they go to school. They nod at their neighbors when they pass. They shop for their groceries and cook their meals and fix the things that break. They play pretend at preparing for sleep. They brush their teeth and wash their faces. The parents don't drink coffee in the afternoons and don't let the boys have too many sweets after dinner. They don't watch scary movies or true crime specials before bed. They act as though every night before this one has been a fluke or some long period that has come to an end. Yet, each night, they lie there in their own rooms, just on the surface of sleep and consciousness. They are either too busy or too anxious or too scared or too lonely to let themselves dip below into that dark underworld. They lie awake in that house, and while the neighbors sleep in their identical homes, the Birches at 110 Mustang Court spend the whole night waiting: waiting to fall

asleep, waiting to hear someone moving around outside their door, waiting to for their eyes to close and their hearts to stop, waiting for the sun to rise, for morning to come, for it all to be over, and to begin again. Tomorrow night will be different, they say, and they move like ghosts from dawn to dusk.

THE STORM

It is not the storm that fells the tree on 110 Mustang Court. Clouds the size of summer roll in and the sky changes first to an eerie shade of green, before it is made dark. The temperatures drop too quickly. The rich and warm humidity is suddenly brisk and jagged. The winds are picking up. There is a flash of lightning and across the neighborhood, everyone counts. One mile, two miles, three miles away. Thunder bellows. The residents of the neighborhood are inside. The hair on their arms stands upright and there is a ringing in their ears. They step away from the windows and take shelter in their bathrooms or their basements. Somewhere, pressures change, and the small funnel begins to form. When the rains come, it is not water that falls, but stone.

And then the winds change. The storm passes. The funnel cloud touches down further east or never at all. The skies open back into day. The elm tree has lost some leaves and some branches have snapped. The tree is falling, but it has not fallen today. The tree is still standing in the front yard of 110 Mustang Court.

THE BOYS

The boys are two years apart in age. From the years when they are old enough to run until they begin the grow hair under their arms, they are almost the exact same size. Naomi cuts their hair the same way with the same pair of scissors on the back deck every three months. The neighbors know their names, they know Robin is the older brother, Riley the younger, but it is difficult to discern who is who. They call them the Birch boys.

One of the Birch boys ride by on their bikes.

The Birch boys are so polite, so kind.

The Birch boys rake the leaves in their front yard and shovel their neighbors driveways without asking.

In the neighborhood, the backyards are open and connected to one another. Fences and sheds are against the homeowners association guidelines for harmonious living. There is an occasional tree, but only one. The houses surround small slopping fields of grass. In the spring, water collects in the low center, becomes muddied with drowning grass. The neighbors spend all summer trying to recover. They plant new seed, cut away flowering weeds, and make sure to not overwater during drier months. They have only just brought it back as the yards begin to yellow in autumn. When the snow falls, the neighborhood children throw themselves on sleds. They are no hills, just slopes and gradual elevations. Enough to go from here to there, but no real flying.

In the backyard, the Birch boys play pretend with the neighborhood kids. There are two tall sisters, Annie and Isabel Cooper, and the smelly kid, Chris Putnam, and the quiet Divya Banerjee, who doesn't play with them very often. The Aguilar kids are older, already in middle school, but if they are bored enough, they will play make-believe. Annie Cooper always calls the

shots. She's not the oldest, but she has all the ideas and a voice everyone can hear. In her vision, they are a roving troupe of bandits preparing to steal the king's jewels. They are space cadets meeting new life forms. They are witches and wizards keeping back a strange and dark force. The backyard is a royal court, a distant planet, a magical circus. The geese flying overhead are enemy airships dropping bombs or magical reinforcements. All of the kids have their own roles to play, and they take their parts very seriously. When they split up into teams, one of the Birch boys tells the group that their mom says they have to be on the same team. The other Birch boy, having never heard their mom say this, nods in agreement.

Naomi, watching from the kitchen sink, sees only half the picture. When the children lift their arms, she cannot see the swords they wield. When they sink low to the ground, she cannot see the battlements they hide behind. Looking at her own sons, she misremembers which one came first. In some memories, she carries them at the same time. It seems that they were always together. She remembers being robustly pregnant and feeling them squirm over one another. This is not true, of course, but it is her memory. There are times when she holds the faces of her sons by the jaw, gently, as if their skulls are just resting there in her palm, and even she cannot tell who is Robin and who is Riley. In their faces, she can see both of them. She can see their father, Leslie's nose and brow ridge. She can see her own chin, and her own father's down-turned lips. In their faces, there is a child she does not recognize as well and in those moments, Naomi has to stop herself from pushing her children away.

The neighborhood kids cannot always come out to play. Annie and Isabel are grounded for fighting in school. Divya needs to focus on her schoolwork. No one answers the door at the Putnam house. The Aguilar kids are pretending to be too old for them today. Robin and Riley walk slowly through the backyard and kick up clumps of grass. The day is hot and the ground is

dry. The Birch boys are bored and sit against the house, where their mother cannot see them, and play in the dirt. Robin rests his hand on his younger brother's arm and gives the skin there a quick pinch between his fingers. Riley pulls his arm back and looks at Robin with wide eyes.

I wanted to see if I would feel it, Robin says.

Did you? Riley asks. Robin shakes his head.

Maybe, you didn't do it hard enough, Riley says. Robin offers him his arm. Riley takes the skin on the forearm and pinches it hard until Robin lets out a soft yelp.

Nothing, Riley says. Maybe we have to try harder.

It becomes a game to them. Robin takes his nails and scratches Riley's exposed thigh until the skin breaks. Riley shakes his head and pulls hard on Robin's hair. Still nothing. They twist and face one another, still crouched below the kitchen window. Robin brings his fist down on Riley's foot. Riley digs his nails into Robin's side. Robin punches Riley hard in the shoulder. Riley takes his head and rams it into Robin's stomach. Robin has to stand up to catch his breath. When Riley stands too, Robin slaps him across the face, leaving a stinging red blotch on his cheek. There are tears in Riley's eyes when he punches Robin in forehead. Robin throws Riley down into the grass and climbs on top of him. One brother twists his body out from under the other and grips his hands around his brother's throat. The Birch boys are rolling in the grass. One brother reaches up towards the sky and holds onto the other by his ears. They twist and tumble over one another until Naomi swings open the backdoor and yells. The Birch boys do not hear her. When she finally pulls them apart, Riley's nose is bleeding and a purplish bump is beginning to form above Robin's left eye. They are covered in dirt and grass and tears and blood. They are smiling. They hurt all over. They both hurt all over.

THE KITCHEN

Naomi wants to paint the kitchen. She has already painted the other rooms and somehow the yellow kitchen has remained the same since they moved in. The windows above the sink and by the table face west and in the afternoon light it feels as if the whole sun has moved into her kitchen.

This room makes me feel like I am on fire, she says to Leslie.

They are sitting on stools at the kitchen island. It is the end of her day and the beginning of his. Naomi is drinking a glass of wine; Leslie is drinking a cup of coffee. Sometimes, when they are sitting at this counter, they pretend they are sitting at some far away bar, at a time before they had two sons, before they had this house, before they knew the smell of one another as intimately as they do now. They pretend this island counter in the middle of the yellow kitchen is place for them to meet all over again. They start everything they say with the word "today" because today is different from yesterday and it will be different from tomorrow.

Today, I am hating this kitchen, Naomi says.

Leslie says she can paint the kitchen if she wants. He is not playing the game. He is actually sitting at the kitchen counter in the house they own. He is nowhere else but here. Naomi stops playing the game as well. Tonight, they drink quietly in their yellow kitchen.

Naomi goes to the store to inquire about primer that will cover yellow as bright as the sun. She purchases what is recommended along with a soft green paint color, the color of new grass in a clearing. Over the weekend, she sends her sons outside to play, and while her husband sleeps, she covers the counters in plastic and tapes over the floorboards. It takes two coats of

primer to even begin to mask the yellow paint, and when Leslie comes down to leave for work, Naomi is standing on a chair, dragging the first brush strokes of the green paint onto the wall.

What do you think? she asks. Leslie reaches underneath the plastic covering the coffee pot, where the cups worth of coffee that Naomi leaves him every morning has grown cold. He pours the coffee into a mug and places it in the microwave.

I didn't know you were going to paint this room, he says.

I told you last week.

I must not have heard.

We were sitting right there. Naomi points at the kitchen island stools, covered in plastic. I said I hate this yellow kitchen and that I was going to paint it.

Well, I don't remember. Leslie pulls the coffee out the microwave and takes a sip. He burns his tongue and makes no reaction. Naomi knows.

Well, regardless, what do you think? Naomi asks again.

I always kind of liked the yellow. Leslie turns away to take another sip of his coffee, pokes his head into the refrigerator to see what he can put together for his afternoon breakfast.

Naomi, standing on the chair, looks down at her kitchen covered in primer and plastic. It appears like a vast tundra, and she and Leslie are two giants walking across. Naomi thinks back to before the house, before the boys, and before Leslie. Naomi can't recall how she used to envision her life. Naomi's greatest strength, in her own opinion, is that she has always known who she is. She is her mother's child, her father's daughter, her sister's sister. Considering who she is to other people, as well as despite that sometimes, she has felt fortunate and prideful in knowing that she is her own person, separate and standing alone. While she is confident in who she is, she has never quite understood who she will be. So many of her defining choices have

come as reactions to place or circumstance. She moves to Chicago to avoid a small-town life in Michigan. She takes jobs in management to pay the bills. She becomes a mother because she is pregnant. She becomes a wife because she is a mother. There is a house in Indiana with an elm tree out front because she can't afford to be a good wife and mother in a city like Chicago. She paints the kitchen green because it is yellow. Naomi never says she regrets any of these choices, to herself or anyone else, because she doesn't, but she wonders what those choices might feel like to make on her own terms.

Naomi is still standing on the chair and painting the wall green. She is lost in these thoughts and these branching moments until she feels a cool, wet hand on her thigh. Just below her old running shorts, Leslie has taken his hand, dipped it in the paint tray, and left a green handprint on her thigh. Leslie is looking up at her with no smile or scowl. His grip is tight for just a second. Without saying a word, he pulls his hand off her leg and walks out to the garage without washing the paint off his hand.

Naomi is alone in the kitchen. She hears the garage door open and close. She hears the voices of her sons outside in the backyard. A small knot of pain begins to boil behind her eyes. The paint fumes are getting to her. It is already after four o'clock in the afternoon. She finishes the section she has started painting, and puts away her supplies for tomorrow. She takes a shower and scrubs the handprint off her thigh. The paint washes away but Naomi can still smell it on her skin. She orders pizza for her and the boys and they eat slices on the floor in the living room while a movie plays. She lets Robin and Riley stay up late and they fall asleep on the couch. She carries them up to their bed one by one. They are growing every day, and this might be one of the last times she can carry them like this. When Leslie comes home from work, he stays down in the living room and only crawls into bed just as Naomi is crawling out.

Naomi is finishing her second coat of the green paint when Leslie comes down the next afternoon and leaves for work without a word. The boys help her tear away the painter's tape and fold up the plastic coverings. In the fading light of the weekend, the green does not look as new and serene as Naomi had hoped. The paint is still drying and Naomi thinks perhaps it will look better tomorrow morning.

That night, when she isn't sleeping, Naomi can only smell the drying paint. She has showered, scrubbed and scratched off the patches of dried paint on her hands and arms, but it feels like that paint smell has buried itself into her skin and nose. She slips in and out of sleep all night, and dreams first of that kitchen downstairs burning in golden flames. Then it's her grandfather's study, her childhood bedroom, the apartment where Leslie was living when they met. That metallic dream-fire catches on everything, every place in her memory. The sound of the burning is raucous, and when she wakes, she sniffs the air for smoke and smells nothing besides the paint, but her ears ring with scorching echoes.

In the morning, she forgets her dreams. She forgets about the smell, about the drying paint. She goes for a run while it's still dark, makes lists in her head for groceries, when she has time to call her sister this week, and her husband's work schedule. She returns, wakes the boys, and takes a quick shower. She has already made the coffee, poured the cereal, walked in and out of the kitchen probably ten times this morning before she notices the walls. There is a soft gasp between her teeth and slight release in her shoulders. Without decision or conviction, she walks up to a thin strip of wall between the refrigerator and pantry door. She places her hand there, feels the dry paint, and steps closer so that the wall is only an inch away from her eyes. She turns and runs out to the garage, checks to make sure the plastic tarps and cans of green paint are still stacked in the corner, and comes back to the kitchen.

The walls are yellow. Not a speck of them has been painted green. They are the same yellow as they were two days ago.

There are no mirrors in the kitchen, yet Naomi can see herself clearly. Her expression changes from surprise to resolution. She steps back, brings her feet together, and straightens her back. She lifts her nose into the air and sniffs. The scent is faint, fainter than it should have been, but Naomi knows the smell because she has spent all weekend breathing it in. It is the acrylic smell of drying paint.

THE FEVER

Boys grow very quickly, Naomi says. She holds a cool, wet cloth to Robin's forehead. She's changed his bedsheets once already today, and already he has sweat through them again. You're growing so fast. Your body can't keep up. Robin says nothing, just turns away and groans. He is in and out of consciousness. His mind is riddled with fever dreams, layers and layers of flesh peeling off, fingernails made of unraveling threads, horses running down the street on fire, giant geese the size of storm clouds flying overhead. He is lost in the pain and everything is so cold.

The lines between what is real and what is not are slippery. His mother is here. His mother is gone. Sometime in the night, his father laid beside on the bed. Somewhere, his younger brother Riley is calling his name. He opens his eyes for a moment in the dark room and he is nowhere, in a space that doesn't exist. Robin puts his fingers against his jugular, remembers how they taught him to check his pulse in gym class. It beats against his fingertips, steady, and then he can't find it again. Gone. This fevered sleep is a maze that Robin is lost in. He is losing the energy to find a new path, to make a new turn.

In the maze, there are things that Robin doesn't understand: how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly; how a body grows in the order that it does, foot into ankle, ankle into leg, leg into hip; the way a bruise heals, from purple to blue to pink to green. He does not understand headaches or sleeplessness or muscle cramps. He doesn't understand how medicine works. He doesn't understand all his multiplication tables. He doesn't understand hypotheses or conclusions. He doesn't understand all the stories on the news; he doesn't understand murder or kidnappings or why anyone would seek to hurt anyone else. He doesn't understand why some books are bad and

some books are good. He doesn't understand bullies who are cruel. His dad says they are proud Native Americans, and Robin doesn't know what that means. His dad doesn't know what Robin means when he says he doesn't understand. Robin doesn't understand how sometimes there are no answers, and he doesn't understand why sometimes he is afraid to ask the question. He doesn't understand why his brother is always crying. He doesn't understand why his body grows so fast. He doesn't understand the growing pains or the fever or the hazy dreams of rotting flesh. He doesn't understand the spots on his face or the smell under his arms. He doesn't understand the pressure in his pelvis or how to control his wet dreams. He doesn't understand the ways that some boys look. He doesn't understand why he likes brown eyes, dark hair, and big, teethy grins. He doesn't understand why he needs to masturbate so often. He doesn't understand why he can never fall asleep. He doesn't understand why he only feels tired as the sun is beginning to rise. He knows when he can see the leaves of the tree outside his window that morning has come again, and he doesn't understand how he is going to survive this.

THE MAILBOX

When the mail carrier hits the mailbox at 110 Mustang Court, he says nothing, but he carries the scrape on the side of his truck for years. The buttercream color of painted metal mailbox has been cut away to reveal the dull gray beneath. When Naomi confronts the mail carrier, points to the buttercream stipes that now run along the side of his white truck, he denies it. She shows him where the damage on her mailbox lines up with the damage on his truck.

Lady, just because it fits, doesn't mean it's true, he says.

The homeowners association doesn't care for the responsible party, only for language and paper. They act as one, a monster with a twenty heads and forty arms. They draft their careful letters with words like unsuitable and responsibility. They pass the letter from one of their hands to the other, until it reaches the dented mailbox.

You are a pixel in the image of our lives, they say. Never forget.

Naomi tries to explain the mail carriers obvious denial. The twenty heads and their forty ears hear nothing. They point to the line on their carefully drafted letter.

By living here, you have agreed to our standards.

Naomi argues. She argues with the mail carrier and the mail carrier's boss. She argues with the city and state. She tries to argue with the neighbor-body, but she has only one head and two arms, and she has lost before she begins.

By living, you have agreed.

Naomi pays for the mailbox to be replaced.

THE NIGHT SHIFT

When Leslie comes home from work, everyone is asleep. Naomi leaves the light on above the stove, and some food on a foil-wrapped plate. Leslie stands at the kitchen island with his hands spread wide on the countertop. His head hangs low. He moves it from side to side, stretching the tight muscles in his neck and back. He steps out of his shoes and undoes his belt. He puts the plate of food back in the fridge. He will eat before work tomorrow. Before work later today. It is early in the morning. The neighborhood streets are empty. The lights are off in everyone else's house.

Leslie works nights; Leslie works nights when he can. Leslie tells Naomi it is hard for him to keep a job because he's too smart for the kind of work that happens at night. Naomi tells him he doesn't have to work nights. But he does. Leslie can't stay awake during the day. He feels most awake and alert at night. Finding good work at night was easy enough when they lived in a city as big as Chicago. But they've lived in Indianapolis for years now, and this is Leslie's fourth job. First, there was a kitchen job. Then, the call center. A short stint in private security, before he was back in a kitchen. A 24-hour fried chicken joint. His company-issued polo smells of sweat and oil. His arms are speckled with small grease burns. At least here, he is a manager. He gets to call the shots, create the schedules, divide up the work in order to be the most efficient. He laughs with the Hispanic cooks, who don't understand a brown man who doesn't speak Spanish. Leslie gets by with the occasional phrase. His hair has grown long and he pulls it up into a short ponytail.

Now you look Indian, boss, they say. Now we get it.

Leslie sits down at the kitchen table. He's pulled the box of wine out of the pantry and brought it with a glass to the table. Leslie sits in his designated chair when they have family dinners. Sitting there in the night, he is surrounded by the ephemera of the day. At Robin's chair is a few pages of incomplete math homework. Riley has made some superhero drawings on a piece of legal paper. Naomi's seat is perfectly clean, but Leslie can still imagine her sitting there with the boys while they worked. She's making grocery lists or calling her sister. A small box tv on top of the fridge is playing a rerun of *Seinfeld* and Robin keeps getting distracted. Dinner has been made, eaten, and the leftovers have been put in the freezer. The dishes are still on the drying rack.

Leslie wonders what they do with his place when they have dinner without him. They are not a family that says grace, but they are well-mannered enough to wait until everyone is seated to begin eating. Do the boys look in the direction of their father's chair? Do they try and imagine what Leslie is doing at work at that very moment? Do they ignore it all together? Leslie sits at the kitchen table in the dark for an hour or two, still with only the stove light on. He wishes he could call his brothers and catch up. One of them just had another baby. Leslie has a new niece. He thinks he will call them later this afternoon, before he goes into work, if he doesn't forget. If any tears fell down on the table in front of him, they would be dry by time the Naomi and the boys sit down for breakfast.

THE LISTENER

Naomi hears everything in the house. What little sleep she gets is shallow, just below the surface. She sleeps as if she were awake, still able to witness the occurrences around her. She can hear the footsteps of her sons as they go to the bathroom, sneak into each other's rooms or down the stairs for a glass of water. She can hear a car pass on the street below her window. She can hear the wind scratch itself through the tree branches in the front yard. An insomniac has no depth for dreams, so what she hears becomes her illusions. Each murmuring sound is an orchestra of open thought. The drip of a faucet, the footfall on a stair, the twist of a doorknob is a tether keeping her on this plane, in this reality, the one for the waking, in a dark house on a dark street. Nothing can be missed.

When Leslie comes home from work, Naomi hears the garage door open and his car pull in. She hears him down in the kitchen, eating and drinking. She can hear him chew and swallow. From their bed, she can feel his heartbeat, feel it vibrate in his chest, down to his feet, where it shakes the floors and the walls. She can place her hand on the cool wall just above her head and feel the *thrum-thrum* of his heart. It is hours before she can hear him make his way to the stairs. He enters their bedroom with a gust of air. Naomi lies on her side facing the door. She is still, breathing, with her eyes open. There is a darkness between them that Naomi knows Leslie cannot see through. To him, she is just sleeping, a murky, terrestrial form under the duvet. He stands in the doorway and looks at her. She lies in the bed and looks at him. In this moment, there is no inhale or exhale or even a breath to hold. There is a brief moment of equilibrium before the next inhale, before the beginning of the next cycle. All the air that they possess is there in the bedroom. It is not a silence but a space for sound.

Leslie takes a breath, closes the door, and steps into their bathroom. Without turning on the lights, he takes off his clothes and turns on the faucet. As he washes his face, Naomi cannot see his naked body, only the curves of his spectral form, where his physicality ends and the room begins. Leslie climbs into bed and passes a hand over Naomi's body briefly, from hip to waist to breast, before retreating. In a few minutes, he is softly snoring. Naomi listens.

THE HOUSE UNDER THE HOUSE

Riley stands at the threshold of sleep and never takes the firm step across, only ever slips and stumbles down the stairwell or the hole. Always he is falling. Riley closes his eyes while lying in his bed and opens them again in the below, in the underworld, in the house under the house. Down there, everything happens out of order. The howl before the fright. The bruise before the punch. The consequence before the action.

Riley calls for his mother or his brother and there is no sound. Someone is whispering his own name. There is a scratching in the walls near his head. Under his feet, the carpet slithers in the same direction, toward his bedroom door, down the stairs. Riley checks every other bedroom and each one is empty. He returns to his own bedroom and finds it empty as well. Riley wants to climb up, to get back to the house above, but there is nowhere to go. Outside his window is nothing but a shapeless black. The voices calling his name was coming from downstairs. Riley hears someone moving around in the kitchen. There is the faint recognizable drum of the morning news anchor. The metallic sound of a spoon hitting the side of a bowl. His family is down there waiting for him.

Downstairs, the kitchen is empty. No spoons or bowls or tv or news. He tries the front door, and when he finally pulls it open, all he can see is the blackness again. Blackness below, blackness above, blackness across. No more identical houses across the street or beside them. No streets or mailboxes or geese standing on the roofs. Seeing now ground below them, Riley wonders if the house is falling down some large hole, and then they are, and the air rushing past the open door is ear-splitting. Riley becomes weightless and his stomach rises into his throat. Riley keeps ahold of the doorknob as the door swings open further and slams him into the

adjoining wall. Riley uses his leverage against the wall to push the door closed and the falling stops. His feet land again on the wood floor of the foyer. Through the window in the door, the blackness is the same.

The voices again. A voice calling his name from the basement. The door leading down there from the kitchen is open. Just by thinking of a place in the house, Riley is there. From the top of the stairs, Riley can only see a few steps before they are lost to the darkness. This dark is different than the black outside which is flat and shapeless. The darkness at the bottom of the stairs is murky and textured, and even from standing above, Riley can feel against his skin like a thick, wet fog. Riley. His mother says his name, and it sounds like she is standing at the bottom of the stairs, just past the murky dark. He takes a step. Riley. His brother's voice now, somewhere further down. Another step. The darkness has not moved as Riley descended. He stands right at its threshold. Riley. His father's voice, even more distant. Riley reaches his hand out into the darkness and watches his arm disappear up to the elbow. It's warmer than he expected. Riley, his family says in unison, and the darkness closes around his wrist and pulls him in.

THE GEESE

A flock of Canadian geese returns to the pond in the center of the neighborhood every spring. They make nests at the edge of marsh grasses and on flat, elevated patches of grass. They lay their eggs and the females incubate them for twenty-six days. The males stand guard. One or two days after they have hatched, the parent geese lead their young around the nest and to the water. At this age, the goslings already know how to feed themselves. The flock stays in the neighborhood for up to nine weeks and when temperatures rise into summer, all geese take flight, headed north.

The homeowners association calls a meeting. Something must be done. The neighbor-body with twenty heads and forty arms makes a list of all the hardships these geese have brought. There is the incessant honking and braying, from early in the morning to late at night. The croaks are constant, irregular, laid over one another. No one has gotten any sleep for weeks. The pond is inhospitable during this time. There is, of course, the excrement, but what the neighbor-body is more concerned with is the geese's defensive behavior. They hiss and lower their heads and run at residents head on. They bark and flap their wings and snap their beaks at anyone passing by. Some people have been bitten. The geese behave this way for weeks.

The residents who own the houses that back up to the pond have the most to complain about. After all, their houses are more expensive and have higher property taxes. They pay more for the natural beauty that the geese disrupt. The geese build nests in their backyards and attack anyone who steps out of the house.

It's not very neighborly, one voice says.

They have no respect, says another.

The geese take over the neighborhood. They walk through the streets and block the cars. Patches of grass have been eaten away. They stand on top of the roofs of houses and honk at each other. When the goslings lose their chick feathers, the light fluff covers every yard and, no matter how careful anyone is, finds its way into homes, to be swept up in dust pans and thrown away. Their excrement is stuck to the bottom of everyone's shoes. The residents are afraid to send their children outside to play. Everywhere everyone looks, there are geese.

This is supposed to be a safe neighborhood, someone says.

Someone suggest harassing them back, with air horns or hoses. Someone suggests letting dogs loose on them. There is a suggestion for a kind of bird repellent, placed in the water and surrounding grass to irritate the geese and send them on their way. There is a suggestion for decoys of coyotes and predator birds to be stationed around the pond. Someone notes that geese cannot take flight from water, and if the neighborhood constructs a short fence around the pond, the first few geese won't be able to leave and the rest will know to keep flying.

Won't those first few geese drown? Someone asks.

Yes, but we will be free.

Someone suggests just arming themselves with baseball bats and hockey sticks and destroying the nests. Someone suggests just shooting them. Someone says they know a good recipe for goose stew.

Someone suggests they just drain the pond all together, and the room goes quiet.

The homeowners association seeks to make a respectable decision that benefits the residents and the geese, the neighbor-body says in unison. We will not drain our beautiful pond. But we will defend it.

The neighbor-body makes agreements to build fences for the houses that back up to the pond. They will use association funds and increase dues for a few years for all residents. They will also plant more trees around the pond to deter nesting. The neighbor-body cannot agree to such violent actions as attacking the geese outright and believe that decoys will detract from the beauty of the pond. Airhorns and predator calls will be just as disruptive as the geese themselves.

The neighbor-body makes their notes and suggestions. The fences are built. The trees are planted. The geese return, in smaller numbers. Every year, the neighbor-body gathers to evaluate the scale of the geese problem. The honking still continues. There are still reports of geese attacks. The geese still make their way into the neighborhood, still perch themselves on the roofs and look down on the passing residents. The neighbor-body cannot bring themselves to enact any measures beyond what they have already done. They can't afford it with their funds or their conscience. Every spring, the geese return. Every summer, they fly away.

THE LIGHT ABOVE THE STOVE

The insomniacs are counting geese instead of sheep as they fly overhead. The geese in the neighborhood have left. The molted feathers of the goslings still cling to the wet grass. Flocks of geese from more southern neighborhoods move overhead in their arrow-shaped formations. They are flying beyond Indiana, further north to the glacial fields of Canada. Their croaks and honks and brays fall down on the houses and streets like bombs. The geese cut through the grey-blue sky of dawn, and when the sun is fully risen, the geese are gone. The neighborhood is quiet. The air is already warm.

In their own beds, the Birch family listens to the geese talking to one another and watches the pale blue light to creep through the blinds. No one slept the night before. They lie on mattresses on the floor. Their belongings are mostly in boxes and bags. All the pictures have been taken down from the walls. Some items are still scattered on the bathroom counters: toothbrushes, tubes of toothpaste, facewash, and a bar of soap.

Downstairs, the walls are still painted yellow. The furniture is wrapped in plastic. The carpets have been cleaned. The floors have been swept. The oven has been cleaned. The refrigerator is empty. The cupboards are bare and the counters have been wiped down. Only the coffee pot is still plugged in. There are disposable paper cups beside it along with a few pots worth of coffee grounds in a plastic bag. The light above the stove has been left on all night.

THE FORECLOSURE

Due to the specifications of the divorce, the house is left in Leslie's name.

It was the only way we could continue with no contact, Naomi said to a neighbor. No obligations.

The Birches move in different direction. Their migration patterns take them south for work or north for school or east for no reason at all or just away, in no set or specific motion. Leslie still owns the house, but keeps it empty. He misses the mortgage payments and he doesn't mow the lawn. The neighbor-body with twenty heads send letters and emails and phone calls that all go unanswered. Finally, they mow the lawn themselves and save every bill.

The phone calls eventually come to Naomi and she says, not my problem.

The phone calls come to Naomi and she says, I can't help you.

The phone calls come to Naomi and she says, stop calling me.

The phone calls come to Naomi and she stops answering.

In the fall, the leaves on the tree change to yellow and fall to the ground. No one rakes them. Every day and night, the house stays dark. The missed payments pile up and everyone has stopped answering the phone. The bank takes possession and waits the appropriate time. Eventually, the word foreclosure is sent to the homeowners association.

Margaret Henderson returns to 110 Mustang Court to assess the house for the sale. She is the one who sees the entire first floor painted yellow. She hires the painters to cover it up. She hires an inspector to check the codes. She has the carpets cleaned and a few lightbulbs replaced. She lights a candle in the kitchen and sets up a speaker playing jazz. She says all the right things

and by the end of the winter, she is welcoming the new residents to the neighborhood, just as the geese are beginning their descent.

THE CLEARING

There is the felling of the tree in the front yard. There is a Dutch disease that has cut through elm trees around the country. The leaves turn yellow in autumn but never fall to the ground. They freeze over in winter and no new green buds grow. It is the same for eighteen other trees in the neighborhood. The homeowners association pays a tree removal service to take them all down in the same week. It is hard work. The trees were selected for their strength and durability. When they are gone, the neighborhood streets look naked without them. Flowers and shrubs used the shade granted by the elm trees begin to shrivel and die. There is a drought that same year. Limitations on water usage are placed on the entire city. There are patches of yellow grass everywhere.

There are families moving out. There are less families moving in. There are not enough residents to pay the dues, and the homeowners association disbands. Those who remain begin making changes. There are houses painted different colors and additions built onto houses. There is a house over on Appaloosa Street that is torn down entirely and built back up again with so many windows. There are more houses torn down because no one has lived in them. There are streets that are never maintained with huge potholes and cracks running through them. There is a city maintenance commission without enough funds to fix the streets. No one wants to live in suburban neighborhoods anymore. Everyone wants land. Nobody wants neighbors. No one is afraid to be alone anymore.

There is no house at 110 Mustang Court. There is no Mustang Court. There is a road with no name. The underground pipes have been closed. There are houses farther away, but none of them look alike. There is a flock of geese returning to the pond. There are no decoys or alarms or

deterrent sprayed in the water. The grass that grew in half-acre plots doesn't recover from the drought. There is an old grass with old memories of a forgotten language that sprouts again. It grows in small, collected bursts. Nothing is flat anymore. Shrubs and flowers and trees no longer wait to be selected from a list on a desk in another state. They have their own processes and pollinators. There are animals that find new shelters where there once were none. The lines of property are blurred, but not erased. There are no regulations for noise, no deterrents for pests, no weed control. There are no decisions to make regarding how something must look, about any collective image. There are no agreements to adhere to beyond the simple ones between sun and grass, grass and soil, soil and water, water and animal. We agree to grow where we can. There is again a clearing, a patch of grass, a moment, and a breath.

CD's notes on future writing: many chapters of this novella are missing/not complete. Some things that I intend to include in some future final draft include future exploration of the house under the house, Leslie's increasing verbal and physical abuse that leads to the divorce, Robin's budding queerness, "the lonely Indian" trope for Leslie, Robin, and Riley, more attempts for Naomi to paint the kitchen, and Riley's suicide attempt. And more geese, probably.

III.

Leslie Birch Was Not Real

Leslie Birch was not real. He stood on the corner of Western and Polk in Chicago, Illinois in November. It was a real place and a real time. If Leslie had really thought about it, he might have wished or even hoped for the realness of this corner to rub off on him. Gum on the shoe. Stuck. Two minutes ago, he was buying a six-pack of beer when he looked outside the window of the corner shop and he thought it was snowing. He swore he saw snow falling, small, dry flakes, dust or dandruff. He left the beer on the counter and the woman standing at the cash register didn't call his name because she didn't know what to say. Leslie Birch stepped outside and it was not snowing. Just cold. The grey of the sky stayed up there out of reach.

Leslie left and walked down the street. On a street this cold and this grey, there was only a small collection of life. Only a few people walking, stepping out of their own corner shops, looking up at their own grey skies. A trio of boys circled the block on bikes. Once, twice, three times. Leslie didn't mind leaving the beer on the counter. He didn't really want the beer. What he had wanted was to stand in front of a cashier and to hand her some crumpled dollar bills and for her to take them from him. As he walked through the city, no one noticed him. They didn't ignore him; that would mean acknowledging that there was a space to him, something to not see, something to not hear. People looked towards him when he yelled or answered his questions when he asked for directions. Their eyes looked past him, through the wisps of steam off his breath. Their words fell on him accidentally and he had to catch them in the palms of his hands. He took to walking down the long streets of Chicago, feeling a point of pleasure just behind his groin in the moments when someone stepped out of his way or turned their heads in his direction when he let out a deep breath.

He had been walking for days at this point. He had left work on Friday morning and took the train home. Leslie worked at a package facility, a huge warehouse out by O'Hare. He pushed a large cart and collected the odd things from tall shelves that people ordered and requested to be shipped to them around the country. Fifty packets of bubble gum, toy guns that looked real, toilet seat covers with a famous actress' face on them, parts of a mannequin, the head, the hand, the left leg from below the knee. The package facility was open and operational twenty-four hours a day. Leslie worked the overnight shift and slept until the early afternoon. When he got off the train, it was only eight o'clock in the morning. He walked to his apartment building and stopped outside, looked up at the façade, to the small square window that was his. Inside, there was an apartment where nothing was real. None of it belonged to him. He was subletting from a friend of an old acquittance. None of it was his. It wasn't his bowl or spoon or even his box of cereal. It wasn't his sheets or his old mattress or his damp towels. There was a time when owning things had meant he had something to write his name on, little as it was. But now, they all belonged to someone else and Leslie had nowhere to write his name. He was an unreal man with no real things. Leslie turned away from his apartment building and kept walking.

Now, it was Tuesday afternoon and Leslie had missed four shifts at the package facility. When he didn't show up for the first shift, one of the floor-leads or operations managers would have called him repeatedly. Leslie's phone died on Saturday. None of the calls went through. Neither did the calls from the credit card companies or the debt collectors. When he didn't show for the second shift, he would have been terminated automatically and his information would have been erased from the system. By the third shift, someone would have cleared out his locker, only to find a pack of nicotine gum and a stick of deodorant. At the start of the fourth shift, it

would be as if there was no Leslie Birch, here or anywhere else. Leslie Birch walked down Western Avenue and no one noticed.

Real or not, Leslie heard the bone break. He heard the snap of the bone first, and then silence. He turned and the street was empty, except for the three boys and their bikes. They were maybe nine years old. Maybe they were fourteen. Leslie had two sons who were adults now, but they had never been nine or fourteen, not in his memory. The boys in the street wore thin jackets and their cheeks and noses were red-stung by winter winds. Two were standing with their bikes still between their legs. The third boy was on the ground, his bike scattered in one direction, his body in another. Leslie saw the boy on the ground try to raise his left arm, and saw where the arm fell away from the shoulder, where it hung too low. Even through his jacket, Leslie could tell the boy's arm was broken. The standing boys looked at Leslie and back at their friend and then to Leslie again. No one made a sound. Down the street, a dozen pigeons all took flight at the same time, as if they had planned it. One, two, three. Leslie, who was not real, who had been walking through the city for five days and sleeping during the mornings in parks and libraries, turned and walked away. He pushed his hands down into his coat pockets and brought in his shoulders. Surely someone else would come. Someone who could help. There was that lady at the corner store; the boys were still in the view of the window where Leslie had sworn he'd seen snow. Leslie Birch had nothing to offer.

He made it only two blocks before he turned around. He picked up his left foot to take a step further way from the boys, to keep walking, and there was a twinge in his knee. He felt as though that knee might never straighten out again if he kept walking south on Western Avenue. Leslie turned his body, a knot untied in his knee, and he set his foot down in the opposite direction. The street was wide, and the buildings on either side were low. To the east, Leslie

could see the downtown of Chicago blooming like a mushroom cloud in the distance, many miles away. These streets were empty and made of the same color as the sky. Grey above, grey below. When he turned around, the boys were still in the middle of the street. Everything was still frozen. Leslie walked to where the broken boy was laid out, and kneeled beside him.

You left, one of the standing boys said.

Leslie grabbed the broken boy's hand on the uninjured arm and squeezed. The boy squeezed back. His grip was weak and his face was drained of any color.

What's your name? Leslie asked the broken boy. His voice was calmer than he had expected. It was the first time he had spoken to anyone in five days. His tone was smooth. His words didn't catch on anything in his throat.

You, you, you, the boy said. His voice was shaking and he spoke between short bursts of breath. Most of the color had drained from his face.

Where are you parents? Who's taking care of you?

You, you, you, the boy said again.

Leslie turned to the two boys still standing with their bikes. What's his name? Where are his parents? He spoke louder now, pinched the words between his teeth. The boys just looked at him. No one moved.

You left, they said.

Wind whipped down the street. Leslie tensed his shoulders as a chill passed through him. He caught a whiff of himself and suppressed a gag. He thought for a second that no one would ever again ask for his name. The thought was as quick and sharp as a needle in the eye. He leaned down to whisper in the broken boy's ear.

I'm not real. I can't help you. I don't know what to do with you.

You, you, you, the boy echoed.

Earlier today, when a cop had kicked his leg to wake up him from sleeping against a tree in Humboldt Park, Leslie had decided to take what money he had on him and buy a bus ticket to Oklahoma. Leslie's father had died earlier that year and he had been a Choctaw Indian who grew up in Oklahoma and never talked about it. That made Leslie half an Indian and he had the blood certificate to prove it, but he didn't know anything more about being Choctaw than he knew about being Cherokee or Chickasaw. When he was drunk, and talking to no one in particular, sometimes he mixed them up. Leslie thought his whole life his father had been part of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, but it wasn't until he passed away that he learned his father was actually Mississippi Band. It wasn't until he passed away that Leslie knew those were two different things, that there was a difference between the people who stayed and the people who didn't and that somehow, his father had lived with both. No one from either tribe came to his funeral. Neither Leslie nor his older brothers knew who to call. His brothers had accepted their father's silence a long time ago. They were now silent Indians themselves, standing like poplar trees at the edge of a field. The funeral was just Leslie, his white mother, and his half-Indian brothers who also had white wives. There were their children, who knew even less. If he had still been married, Leslie's own white wife and his own quarter-blood sons would have been there as well. The only Indians Leslie knew were his father, his brothers, and his sons. The only Indians Leslie knew were the ones who made him and ones he made.

None of his Indians knew what any of it meant. All these words, delineations, blood quantum, lines drawn between one river or another. They didn't know the language, the stories, the families, the past. Being half-Indian with no history was like being just half-white, the other half a mystery. Not real. They had none of it, none of the stuff of being Indian, and it was

Leslie's father who had kept it from them. Leslie had asked, first in quiet, timid tones and then in hollers and screeches louder than winds. His father had never answered and Leslie had never figured it out. What did a son know of his father's behavior, of his intentions, of his choices and consequences? Or of his own? Nothing, nothing. Leslie had tried to go to Oklahoma before and never made it. Short spells of compulsion, time that Leslie couldn't answer for. He'd wake as if from a dream and find himself on a highway approaching St. Louis. He would always turn around, always a job to get back to, sons he couldn't leave behind then. Leslie thought, because he wasn't real anymore, that maybe this time he could make it. Leslie knew that there wasn't anything down there for him. There would be no families, no long-lost cousins, no one would know his name or his father's. Leslie knew that if he wasn't real here that he wouldn't be real there, but it was the motion of the thing. Leslie could be not real, but he could be unreal with movement, with direction, with velocity. That trajectory kept him solid. He had been walking for the past five days. And now, he was kneeling in the middle of the street with a broken boy and no one was moving.

I've called an ambulance! The lady from the corner store was standing on the sidewalk with a phone to her ear. A small crowd of onlookers had stopped on the sidewalks. Leslie looked up at them and saw what they must have seen. A broken boy lying there in the middle of the street. A not-real man kneeling at his side. The two boys with bikes stood above them like angels. It must have looked like a painting or an oil spill across the pavement. Something like that.

When the ambulance came, they loaded the broken boy onto a stretcher, which made him look small. On the street, Leslie had forgotten he was a child. The boy had taken up his entire view for about ten minutes. The EMTs asked Leslie some questions, while still tending to the boy, their attention focused on keeping his arm still and hoisting him into the ambulance.

I didn't see it happen. I only heard the bone break. I swore I heard it, from half a block down the street.

He didn't tell them he had left at first, that he had walked away. It wouldn't have made any difference. The EMTs let the other two boys climb into the ambulance and then it pulled away with its sirens blaring. The small crowd of passersby turned away from Leslie as the ambulance left. He pulled the three bikes out of the street and leaned them against a fence. When he turned around, the grey street was empty again. There was no sign that the boys had been there, or that Leslie had either. He walked to the middle of the street where the boy had fallen. Leslie Birch wasn't real; he was sure of it. If a car drove down this street, it would not see him and would veer ever so slightly out of his way. Leslie felt something twist behind his sternum, then the sensation of a string being pulled taut from his anus to his throat. His body tense and curled around itself. Leslie brought his head down to his knees and vomited onto the pavement. The partially digested food and stomach bile that left Leslie's body was now as much his as the street was his, as the sky was his. In the cold November air, steam rose from the warm vomit and spilled out of Leslie's open mouth and no one noticed.

The Devil Around the Corner

His place wasn't exactly right around the corner, but it was close. Closer than I realized. Closer than I thought it should be. If there's one thing you can count on in this city, it's that everything is farther away than you think it is. Takes twenty minutes longer than you expect to get where you're going. Living here feels like I'm constantly chasing things down, like I'm always running late. I can't quite get anywhere on time. But there he was, his place I mean, come on the block so quick I almost missed it.

I met the Devil after the first few months of not sleeping. This was my first time living on my own, here in Chicago, and I was starting to lose myself. I moved here last June, right out of college, with a real adult office job and an apartment in Wicker Park I could barely afford. It was supposed to be an exciting time. Everything I had always wanted. But after a few months of living here, I stopped sleeping. I was never that good of a sleeper before, but here in the city, so much rushes by, the people, the cars, the ideas. It felt like I was being eroded away. All this washing over me all the time. I couldn't catch a break and it was all keeping me up. There's something about this city that feels like we are living on the edge of the world. These buildings and streets, built on top of each other, struck up against a giant lake that you can't see across, even on the clearest days. It feels like there is nothing else here, just this city and that water, and it was starting to make me feel like I was going insane. Everyone running around to their jobs or their dinner reservations or their rooftop happy hours, all of us some colony at the edge of existence, forgotten where we've come from. I can't remember why I first thought of it, but I thought a tattoo might pin me to the moment, if only briefly. And I needed to be pinned down then, like a moth in a glass case, pinned with something that hurt, something that told me, *Hey, you've only got this one body and it can't take all this life. You can't handle all this reality head*

on. Life was starting to feel like staring directly at the sun with no protection. Like being fucked by the sun no protection. I needed something that could help me see myself as tangible. I had this idea to get a tattoo, flowers for my mom, on my wrist, see? I wanted something permanent like that, and I'll be honest, I wanted it to be painful. All those months not sleeping, my body had started to not feel real. In sleep, we're supposed to reset ourselves, reset mood, memory, and metabolism. I've done a lot of reading on sleep, because I thought that would help and well, I've had the time. But without sleep, I wasn't doing any of that, the resetting I mean. So, my body began to feel old, like it was in the process of decaying and somewhere in there I began to feel it less and less. I'd walk by a mirror and think, had I always been this tall? Or I'd notice a bruise on my shin, dark, purple, and shiny like a small galaxy and I'd have no idea how it got there. Something about a tattoo, watching someone drag a pulsating needle across my skin, watching someone make that pain happen, that felt like something that could help, and I wanted to get something for my mom. She used to live in Chicago, and I thought I'd be able to feel her here, but it's all so different. None of the places she used to talk about are here anymore, or at least they don't look the same. It doesn't feel like her city, and I was looking for a way to connect to her since she's not around anymore. I mean, she's not dead. She just lives in Ohio. But that feels worlds away now.

The Devil was this tattoo artist I found online. His shop was the first one I found, closest to where I lived, and I told you how I just stumbled across it. It looked enough like a tattoo shop to me, and he wasn't totally frightening, and it seemed as good a place as any. The Devil ran his tattoo parlor out of a garden apartment, below a vape shop with a glowing green neon sign that said "SMOKES" in big, bright letters, and it pulsed and danced. At night, that whole block was green, like we were on the bad side of town in Emerald City, all of it unnatural and reflective.

The front half of the space that faced the street was the shop, always glowing green from the front windows that hung below the sidewalk, and in the backroom, he made it into a kind of studio apartment. He had his mattress on the floor, and a small kitchen bar that I never saw him use, and he had only dark-colored furniture, red and brown. A big leather couch, with all the stuffing bursting out, and cheap red sheets, red bowls and plates stacked in an unused sink, with a fraying checkered rug on the floor. There was a set of mix-matched wood chairs and a table, all scratched up. In that backroom, where you couldn't see the green light, and there was only one narrow window where the backwall met the ceiling, that room felt so much like it was part of a body, like the back of some giant throat. The two rooms, the front and back, they acted like two sinister opposites, two types of poison for you to choose from. That green was harsh and metallic, and that red, I mean, it felt dangerous, I can't explain it, like you had been swallowed by something big, and then you were stuck and choking it, whatever it was, and you couldn't help but feel bad for the thing that ate you, like it was your fault, and then you'd be choking, too. In that backroom, it was always warm and humid, regardless of the weather outside. The cinderblock walls would sweat at night. Everything had a certain moisture to it, a heat you couldn't quite turn away from. That place was so unlike my own apartment, the one I tried to make a quote-unquote "adequate sleeping environment," but this back-of-the-throat room felt like a better place to be. Being down there below the vape shop for the first time, it felt like the city didn't happen there. It was just loud music you could feel in the air and the subtle scents of latex and burning skin. Already, before the tattooing even began, it felt like an escape.

Obviously, the Devil had a lot of tattoos himself. I don't trust a Devil who runs a tattoo shop with bare skin. And thank god because his tattoos were all so beautiful. A little bit horrifying, but in a way that made me feel sad and safe. His arms were covered in all these faces

that swirled together following the curves of his muscles. Some of the faces looked tragic and terrified, some were melancholic, and some looked euphoric, just so goddamn happy to be there tattooed on his forearm. The faces looked like they were inside of him, just below the surface. With each flex of his arm, they squirmed there underneath his skin. I watched them the whole time he did my first tattoo. I told him about my idea for wildflowers on my wrist for my mom. The Devil took his machine, and, with no prior drawing or template, he created this sketch-like design of wildflowers that used to grow in the sloping backyard of my childhood home. I didn't even have to tell him about them or show him a picture. He put the needle against my wrist and it's like the ink rose to the surface, like it had always been there, and he was just uncovering it. I didn't know what to expect with the healing process, but over the next few days, my wrist became warm to the touch, a little puffy, soft and delicate yet scratchy where the skin began to peel. I became enamored with that feeling. I'd hold my wrist up to my cheek and feel that heat from all the blood, all of those cells gathering under the surface trying to expunge that poison I paid to have put there. It felt like magic to me. And what was even more magic, what felt impossible then, was that I started sleeping. Not much, just an hour or two, but an hour or two of real, honest sleep for a few nights, while the tattoo healed. But then, when it was done, and my skin was just skin again, one and the same with the ink, and that warm feeling went away, I stopped sleeping. So, I went back to the Devil's tattoo shop for another tattoo. And another, and another. Anything to get that feeling back.

We would do one tattoo at a time. I'd wait for it to heal, and I would cherish those days and the brief few hours of sleep that I got each night, which felt a winter's hibernation to me then. I'd wait until the last drop of heat left that patch of skin, and only once it was completely done, then I would go back. He'd come up with the design for each of them, and somewhere

along the way he just stopped telling me what he would do, or I stopped caring. He'd pull some memory from my skin, illustrate it in some new way that I couldn't see before. And then parts of me began to take shape all over my body. This shoreline on my arm is from where my family used to go camping every summer. This little fox skull on my ankle like the one my younger brother used to carry around with him. This dead tree on my forearm is still alive in my memory. I used to be able to see it from my bedroom window. Sometimes we'd talk during, and sometimes not. He just worked, pulled my skin taut, twisting, and pinching me between his fingers. The needles didn't even hurt anymore. Just soft little burnings happening all over. The tattoos got bigger, and took more time for him to do. I was in the shop later and later, and then he started asking me to stay. Or I asked him if I could, and he didn't say no. I can't really remember. Either way, every few weeks, he'd craft a new design of ink on my body, and the world felt a little clearer, and my body felt a little bit steadier, and we would sleep in his room at the back of a throat, or he would sleep, and I would try my best, and now I wear long sleeves to my office job.

As the tattoos healed, those little morsels of sleep I found became smaller and smaller. I would just lie next to the Devil and watch the ceiling, or I'd watch him, or I'd watch the back of my own eyes. Some nights, I couldn't tell if I was sleeping or not. In the twisted corners of exhaustion, it's hard to tell what is and what isn't. My eyes would blink, an hour or two would pass, but I'd feel unchanged. No further rested, no less exhausted, like my eyelids were just doors to another time, not vehicles of rest. I've been living like this for almost a year, months of not sleeping, or this empty pseudo-sleep, moments where I am surely unconscious, but it's definitely not regenerative sleep, not prosperous in any way. I've reached a point where I feel like I should be dead. That's what insomnia feels like, like I've died but certainly not passed on.

Like death came along and forgot about me. A clerical error, and now I don't sleep. Haven't I already told you all this? I can never remember anymore, what I've said and what I haven't. All that death-like pain is sitting in all my joints and bones, behind my eyes, running shakily through my veins, so many sleepless nights that tack onto my body like weights, pulling me down. Sleeping with the Devil felt like the best I could do then. At my own apartment, I've got my sleep mask, and my special pillow for side sleepers, a white noise machine, and a really nice mattress I bought when I moved here. I've got my fan in a perfect position. I have earplugs when I need them. I have two glasses of water, one cold, one lukewarm. I have stretches and meditations and rituals. I have routines like you wouldn't believe, that begin when the sun is still high in the sky, when the world is still very much awake, and I am focused on sleeping, trying to pull something dark out of me and into the room. At the Devil's place, I didn't have any of that, just a mattress on the floor in the back of a tattoo shop. And it's the same. All that money, all those things, all that time, and I sleep as well as I did on the floor. At least with the Devil, I wasn't sleeping alone.

I can remember a different version of myself, from over a year ago, who didn't sleep that well, but certainly slept more. I was kind and generous. I was a diligent employee, and I called my mom often, and I walked around this city like I lived here, like all we had was time together, me and Chicago. I sat at my desk with good posture and filed my reports or attended meetings as an attentive notetaker. I went on dates with tech guys who took me to these "highly secretive" bars that anyone could find on a TripAdvisor list. I listened and nodded when they gave me a detailed the history of this city I was born in and enjoyed the casual, uninteresting sex with them because it was something to do with my body. I went to museums with new friends and stood for long hours in front of paintings and textiles. I swayed to live music at the back of a crowded bar

and drank sweet, syrupy cocktails. My life doesn't look like that anymore. Whatever physicality I have in my life nowadays comes from the tattoos. The rest of it is all worthless to me. Ok, not worthless, that sounds bad. Please don't write that down. It just feels unimportant. My work gets in just under the wire now, and usually is full of mistakes. I don't go out after work or on the weekends. And there is this irritability pumping through my veins that I can't shake. There have always parts of living in Chicago that are frustrating, sure, but they felt like manageable sacrifices before. Now, I'm the neighbor who pounds on the walls when my neighbors are talking too loud. I stopped going on dates with those tech bros, or anyone else, because I couldn't stand to hear people talk about the same pointless shit anymore. If someone runs into me on the street or on the train, if they push their hard shoulder into my hard shoulder, there was a time when I could let that go. Not anymore. Now, I'm the guy on the train who is starting fights because someone dropped their bag on my lap or stepped on my foot. Now I know I've said this before. Maybe not to you, maybe not to anyone. But I have been saying it, even if only to myself: exhaustion feels like being invisible. The world passes through you, each time leaving less of you behind. It feels like not having a body, just the remnants of one, in the space between is just air, something that so clearly does not belong to you. Something you can't hold, and you just let go. And no one cares. Everyone's suffering. Everyone's tired, they say, and so then it becomes nothing.

Whatever was happening with this tattooing, and whatever was happening with the Devil, it seemed to be helping. It seemed to be giving something back to me. And even then, things between the Devil and I weren't ever all that serious. I wouldn't have even called it a relationship. We mostly just talked about me. Come to think of it, I can't even remember him talking about himself at all. There's a certain kind of narcissism that comes with insomnia, that

comes with trying to save yourself. Whatever the Devil and I had, it felt entirely physical and mostly out of ease. I won't lie to you, the sex was good. It was really good. It seemed that the more he tattooed my body, the more he knew it. Sex with the Devil was ecstatically gentle, robustly quiet, like nothing I had experienced before. He'd bear all of his weight down onto me, with his face tucked into the corner where my neck met my shoulder. Without moving his face from there, without looking, his hands would glide over all of my skin and find my tattoos, all the places he marked me, even the ones that weren't fully healed, and he'd hold on to me there. Those seemed to be my only firm pieces to him. He'd even disobey his own advice to leave healing tattoos alone, and, as if he couldn't help himself, he would grab onto my new ink, sometimes still freshly wrapped in plastic. He'd take his large hands and squeeze down hard on the space around that tattoo. The ripe heat of his hands matched the bubbling warmth of my healing skin and the humidity of that back-of-the-throat room. The pain would be excruciating but then so is having a body. Every moment with the Devil burned so bright, it was becoming easier to ignore all the dark spots in between. But then I didn't even know him. I couldn't hold him in my memory any longer than the time he spent physically in front of me. But when he wasn't around, there was a longing, a piece of me itching to get back to him. I don't think that he ever felt the same.

I half expected some day to round the corner and find that glowing green light but with boarded-up shop windows below, like the tattoo shop was never really there, just something I was finding for myself over and over again. I know I marked on that intake form that I feel "somewhat" detached from "reality," and I don't want you to think that I'm crazy. But I mean, come on, this all can't be real, can it? I mean, yeah, this city feels real as fuck sometimes. Real fucking horrible. But I've got history with Chicago. I was born here! Technically, I only lived

here for a little over two years as a baby, and as an adult, I've only been back a year. But we came to Chicago a lot as a family. This is where my parents met. This is where my brother and I were born. We left when we were both still really young and I always told myself I would come back. I just assumed I would always live here. Where I'm from, if you're lucky enough to get out, if that's something you even want, everyone gets out the exact same way. Kids who grow up in small midwestern towns move to small midwestern cities. If they grow up in small midwestern cities, they move to bigger ones. And if they grow up in big midwestern cities, they move to Chicago. You moved up and out. It was just something I was always planning on doing. Now it feels like a mistake and there's nothing I can do. I'm too tired.

A little over half a year ago, I passed the exact same age my mom was when she gave birth to me. She was twenty-three and living with my dad and she was working at a hotel and suddenly she was a mother. I was here in this world, and I was her responsibility, and her whole life turned on this moment, focused in on this baby that she wasn't ready to have. That's what she told me at least. And here I was at this same time in my life, eating falafel on my floor because I couldn't afford to buy a couch yet. I just had thrift store pillows pushed up against a wall, and I was living like that. No partner, no responsibilities beyond my nine-to-five, just some half-furnished apartment in a city at the edge of the world and a Devil who lived in the back of a throat. And I know, this mistaken city of mine could very easily be the thing keeping me awake. I am very much aware of that, but sometimes, one's "day-to-day environment" is not so easily changed. I have a job that mostly pays my bills, and a boss who hasn't fired me yet for sloppy work. I am young and inexperienced. Where can I go? Where would it be different? Yes, I could trade one life for another, but for what? An experiment? And if I continue not sleeping? If I

continue eroding away? If the city is staying, so am I. There must be another solution. I thought the tattoos could save me, but now, I'm not so sure.

About a month ago, the Devil told me he couldn't do anymore tattoos for me. I asked him why, and without speaking, he just took out his machine, held the needle to the skin on the back of my hand, and I felt the pulsing vibration that I had come to love so much, felt the heat where it should have begun puncturing me, saw the ink dribble and dollop and then run off the back of my hand like water on stone. He said my skin would no longer take the ink. He said I was full, even though there was still plenty of space across my body. But he said my skin was filled to the very top with this poisonous stain, and that my body had done all the healing it would do for me now, and rather than let me live with unhealed patches of ink all over my body, my skin was acting proactively, and rejecting this art that I so desperately felt like I needed. It wouldn't let me have it anymore, or that healing process that came with it. I know that sounds crazy, but I saw the black ink give up on me. I saw it refuse to sink into my skin. I saw it trickle across my hand and drip off the tips of my fingers onto my jeans, these ones that I am wearing now, see? The ink stained these pants, but it wouldn't stain me anymore.

I was devastated, and then the Devil said that I probably shouldn't come around the shop anymore since he had a business to run, and since I was no longer paying for any tattoos, there wasn't really any reason for me to come by, and that wasn't the least bit heartbreaking as my skin rejecting me. I don't remember saying anything to him, no final goodbye or thank you. I just got up and walked out of the shop below the green glowing sign, and I was Dorothy, going home, no fancy balloon, no glittery shoes to clink thrice, just walking my tired body around the corner. I didn't have anything to collect from his place. I had taken up no space in the Devil's life,

regardless of how much of himself he had etched into me. And I won't go back. Like I said, I'm too afraid that if I return, I'll find the shop was never really there. That I was never really there.

I don't miss him, not particularly. I mean he was kind, and beautiful, and his body felt solid against mine. And that irritable feeling seemed to go away with him. I'd like to think I was becoming more gracious on all accounts, but maybe I was just less irritable towards him. It's hard to be frustrated with the Devil, like being frustrated with a tree and wondering why it doesn't appease you, why the whole forest doesn't bend to your moods. But I don't miss him. I mostly miss the tattooing. That sounds selfish, but that's all I know how to be currently. Yes, those tattoos and that healing sensation gave me these buoys of sleep that probably kept me alive this last year. But while the Devil was actually tattooing me, when he was finding these memories buried beneath the surface of my skin, I could just talk and talk. The Devil never interrupted or shared any personal anecdotes of his own. I'm sure it was annoying, the same way it must surely be annoying now. I talked about my sleep problems, but then I started talking about all this other stuff that I wasn't talking about before. I talked about my parents' divorce and how I didn't speak to my dad anymore. I talked about growing up with my brother and how close we used to be. I talked about how I was supposed to be this adult, living on my own, and how much I was failing at that, at every part of it. I talked about all these things that I probably should have been saying to someone else, someone professional, like you. The talking, and whatever sleep I got from the healing tattoos, those are the parts I miss the most.

And honestly, I'm tired of hearing what other people have to say about my sleeplessness. Sometimes, I feel like the whole world is fucking lying. Whether they are sleeping or not, other people have got to feel this way, right? There have got to be people who get their full eight hours of sleep, and still feel like they have nothing to give. Other people have must be living in this

purgatory where being dead and alive happen side-by-side. But no one talks about it, and when you do, they tell you to just wait for things to get better, or they say eventually all that not-sleeping will catch up with you and you'll collapse, and then you'll sleep. But it's not true. Sure, I am collapsing. I am collapsing right here in front of you, but I am still awake, still waiting. The worst is when people have nothing to say and they look at you with these eyes made of pity and relief, pity for your horrible life and relief it isn't theirs. How childish it must all sound to you. I can barely stand the sound of my own voice anymore, but talking feels like that only thing I can do. I could talk about all this with the Devil, whether he was real or not. All he did was nod or shake his head or make soft animal-like noises from the back of his throat. He offered no platitudes or stupid solutions. He probably didn't even fucking care.

Now, without the tattooing, things are worse. That's why I am here. I'm still not sleeping at all, and it feels a little bit like I've begun the arduous task of dying. My skin can't hold anymore healing. My hands feel weak, like they can't hold the things I need or pick me up when I've fallen down. I walk with shaky steps, like my feet can't handle the distances. My eyes are too sensitive to see the lights. I worry that my mind is next, that it is slipping away, that it will be unable to hold my memories and they will all just slip between the folds of my brain and fall around me like confetti. I will forget when and where I am. I will forget who I am and then, what need do I have for rest? Yes, I have a vivid imagination. Spend the better part of a year staring at the ceiling instead of sleeping and you will too. It all feels connected, tied into an impossible knot. Here I am, a boy who cannot sleep, in a city that won't let him catch his breath, and I am just looking for something that makes me feel like I am human, that I have a body. And even that ends up failing me. I feel stuck here, playing out a game I know I've already lost. I wish I could just pack it all up and leave, even if it was only just around the corner. But even that sounds

exhausting. I barely had enough energy to make it here, to whatever this is going to be. I don't even know how you conduct sleep studies on people who never sleep. Do you just watch me sit here all night? Or do you spend your whole shift just listening to me talk? Do I vomit out all the ways I'm not sleeping, all the reasons I'm so goddamn exhausted, all the things keeping me awake, and then I'm done? And then a new day rises? All without any actual sleep?

Night Shift (an excerpt)

The first course is always words. Ava printed the ad and taped it to the fridge. DREAMERS WANTED. I thought it was referencing something else, she said. Ava worked as an ESL specialist in the Richmond Public Schools. The ad was for a new restaurant downtown looking for line cooks. Maybe it was an old restaurant with new ownership. It was hard to tell. I called the number on the ad, and the restaurant manager, a deep voice named Ivan, asked me to come in to interview. I agreed, and he gave me the address. When I asked him for the name of the restaurant, as the ad didn't specify, Ivan's voice sank into a register below what I could hear over the phone. I couldn't ask again. The restaurant was built into an old brick house, probably historic. There was no sign, just the street number. My checks came from an anonymous holding company that owned several restaurants in Richmond. Whenever anyone would ask what I did for work, I would say I was a cook at a restaurant downtown, and they would just nod. No one ever needed any more information.

The children brought pages of material to the kitchen door every day around four in the afternoon. They brought discarded magazines, day-old newspapers, old schoolwork, and any number of pieces of paper calling for lost puppies or mattress sales or estate planning torn down from telephone poles. There was never a shortage of tossed away language here. The youngest child was only eight years old, and the oldest was seventeen. Ivan paid each of them with crumpled dollar bills from his pants pocket and tossed the new stack of pages on the prep table for the cooks. Each of us took a pair of scissors and began cutting. We were instructed to cut out words of middling interest. We didn't cut out articles or forms of be, but prepositions were good

enough. Proper nouns or highly specific jargon were strictly off limits. I cut out words like smoothie and exempt and judicial.

The words should sound interesting, Daryl said. She was the chef de cuisine. Dreams can be so unstable. We need to give our patrons a foundation of consonants and vowels. We need to give them words to swallow, otherwise they will choke or starve.

After we had cut a significant number of words, Marceline and David worked to decide which words should go together, while Arsam and I filled shallow bowls with alkaline water. We placed the grouped words randomly on the water's surface, making sure none of them touched or overlapped. By the time the bowls were placed in front of the patrons, the paper would have dissolved, leaving just the inky words on the water. Patrons were instructed to take their small spoons and scoop up the words, one at a time. Bringing the spoon to their lips, they slurped and swallowed, with no chewing. The bowls always came back to the kitchen empty.

The menu was designed entirely by Daryl. She grew up in Virginia Beach and scooped ice cream every summer. She studied cooking in France, and trained in restaurants in Milan, Oslo, and Taipei. She spent years researching and testing recipes based entirely on their aromas. She became known for menus that contrasted hearty, comfort food with pungent smells. She loved fruits like durian and papaya, greens like collards and Brussels sprouts, milky and moldy cheeses. A famous food critic once referred to her as an artist of fermentation.

Scents and aromas are so intrinsically linked to our memories, Daryl said once in a rare interview. It is part of our anatomy. Smells come through our nose, are converted to information, and that information is sent to our amygdala and hippocampus. These are the parts of the brain that process emotion and memory and smells are the only sense that travel to this part of the

brain. Most cuisine loves to play in cooperation with that biology. I prefer to play against it. I want my diners to be uprooted, out of themselves, before the bite brings them back. Or brings them somewhere else.

She was one of the top chefs in the world. She received two Michelin stars for two different restaurants. And then she disappeared. Some say there was a difficult divorce with a messy ex-wife. Others say a nervous breakdown. Marceline said she heard her parents died, one after the other, in a matter of months. Daryl reappeared in Richmond after over a year, to little fanfare. If anyone knew who Daryl was, they kept it to themselves. Ivan gave her free reign in the kitchen, but that seemed to stem more from an ambivalence than respect. There was never any reviews in the Times-Dispatch or any local magazines. I couldn't find any headlines about her or this restaurant. No one seemed to know that she was here, that any of us were here.

For the remainder of the courses, we used the food stored in the large pantry just off the kitchen. The pantry and kitchen were situated in the back half of the house's first floor. The remainder of that floor, as well as all the old bedrooms upstairs, were turned into dining rooms. There were small tables, with room for no more than two or four patrons at a time. At max capacity, the restaurant could only serve roughly thirty patrons at a time. The walls in the dining rooms were painted red, with large brushstrokes. During service, when those rooms were lit only by mirrored candle sconces and dim bar lamps at every table, the walls looked soft and wet, like the inside of a cheek.

The food that was kept in the pantry was delivered before any of the other cooks arrived for their shifts. Daryl and Ivan handled ordering and inventory. The contents of that pantry were never the same from one day to the next. Cow tung and squid ink. Pomegranates and grape

leaves. Whole pheasants and cured beef. Fermented kelp and raw oysters. While we were cutting out our words for the first course, Daryl made trips back and forth from the pantry with armloads of ingredients. Once the words were platted and ready for service, we washed our hands, retied our aprons, and awaited our instructions.

For the second course, we served memory. Marceline and David worked on the soup while Arsam and I worked on the salad. Each was served in big bowls, one for soup and one for salad at each table. The patrons were not given any salad plates or soup bowls and ate their second course out of these shared vessels with individual forks and spoons.

No one's memories are their own, Daryl said. Not really. They belong to us as much as they belong to the other people and things that we remember.

These foods played against Daryl's original creed. The scents in the kitchen were not off-putting, but inviting, luring, serene, and sensual. Alliums sizzled and sweat in spiced oil. Egg yolks, mustard, and anchovies were emulsified into a dressing. Chickens were roasted in buttermilk. Even before the large bowls were set at their tables, patrons were visibly salivating.

That's the memories coming out, Daryl said. It's in the spit.

CD's notes for future writing: this story is intended to follow Riley working this night job at a strange job, as he becomes more and more entranced with the people who work there, losing focus on all else, and leaving behind his relationship with Ava. It is unclear if he ever leaves this place.

The Watchers

There is an ambulance parked outside the apartment building across the street. Its lights are on but its sirens are off. The whole scene is muted. People mill around the truck and stand in the shade of the palm tree out by the street. I can see people talking, but I can't hear their words. I can only make out the sounds of their voices. I can distinguish between declarative sentences and questions. I can tell who is speaking English and who is speaking Spanish. No one is crying or screaming. I am looking down on the scene from my apartment's window across the street. Sweat marbles at my hairline and rolls down my face. Standing in front of the box AC unit in just my boxers, the forced air dries out my skin until it feels taut. I feel like I have been thirsty for months.

The city has already issued a public health mandate. It is the fifth straight day over a hundred and ten degrees. The airport has cancelled over fifty flights due to technical failures. A small dust storm has kicked up on I-10 just south of the Gila River Indian Reservation that has caused a twenty-car pile-up. News reporters walk through tent cities on the south side and speak with meteorologists, urban planners, and engineers who say the heat that people are experiencing is likely ten to twenty degrees hotter than what was recorded by traditional thermostats. They demonstrate with scientific devices how the heat is actually coming at us from all directions. Local organizations have set up cooling centers with awnings, giant fans, and large insulated tubs filled with ice and water. Unused city busses are parked at various locations across the city with their air-conditioning turned on. Hospitals tell reporters that their burn units are filled mostly

with contact burns, second or even third degree, from touching car door handles, metal tools, and the pavement.

Sonia asks me what is happening. She keeps her eyes on the ambulance while I climb into her car. I shrug but she doesn't see me. I shuffle the piles of trash that are at my feet. Receipts, plastic coffee cups, grocery bags, and take-out boxes.

Just leave it alone, Robin, she says. I hold up my hands in a sign of non-violence.

She has taped a tarot card onto the dashboard in front of the passenger seat. The Fool. There is a long crack that runs the length of the bottom of her windshield. Sonia spends a lot of time in her car to avoid her nosy roommates. Plus, her car's AC works better than the box unit in her room.

At the movie theatre, she parks on the side of the building and sends a text. Eventually, Rosa opens the side door, which is painted to blend in with the concrete walls. Rosa looks around and waves us in. Sonia and I can't afford to go to the movies every day after work, so we rely on her ex-girlfriend to sneak us in. Rosa doesn't care as long as we don't sneak into the popular movies that people actually buy tickets to see. And Sonia and I don't really care about the movie. We only come here because it is cool and dark. The mall is tiring because if you sit for too long, the security guards ask you to leave. The libraries are overcrowded. Our cheap apartments are no match for Phoenix summers. Sonia and I sit through sappy rom-coms, overly religious war movies, and family-friendly animated comedies. We watch the same movie for weeks at a time. Lately, we have been watching the same apocalyptic thriller that I swear I saw years ago. We talk through the whole thing and always miss the first fifteen minutes.

The ambulance is gone when Sonia drops me off after the movie. There is no caution tape or any sign that anything has occurred here. After Sonia drives away, I stand outside my building. I miss being out here. Somewhere, the sun is setting even though I cannot see it. The sky is orange. It is still a hundred degrees. When someone exits my building, they recognize me and hold the door open. I take my cue and head inside.

Sonia sends me a link to an article about the apartment building across the street. It's two o'clock in the morning and we both have to be at work in a few hours. The article says a child died in that apartment building today. Cause of death is listed as heat-related complications. The child's name, age, and gender are not listed. There is no language concerning who is to blame. The article uses a lot of sentences that rearrange the same words to say that something happened and they don't know why. By the time I have finished reading the article, Sonia has sent a flurry of texts about how often this kind of thing happens here and how fucked it is and how no one really cares. It happens all the time but it doesn't have to. Sonia sends statistics that I know she doesn't have to look up. Each year, there are over 150 heat-related deaths in Maricopa County. Each year that number grows. Each year, the stretch of days above a hundred and ten degrees is longer and longer.

All heat deaths are preventable deaths, Sonia says. She's said it before. She used to say those words to donors and city leaders, until the organization she worked for lost funding. Sonia is from Tucson, where things are just as bad.

You live with bad things, she says, and you hope you never get used to them.

Sonia and I grade SAT essays at Red Meadows Public Middle School which people call Dead Meadows. Over the summer, the Arizona state college boards sets up auxiliary grading teams to help handle the influx of summer test takers. Several teams work out Dead Meadows and other locations around the city. Sonia and I work on the same team, led by a woman named Nicole. We work out of the middle school classrooms with posters on the wall advocating for positive mindsets and treating our peers with respect. We sit and grade essays in the small student desks. We have scheduled bathroom breaks. We eat our lunch in the cafeteria. From the teacher's desk, Nicole reminds us that we are not permitted to use our phones while grading and reprimands us for not hitting our daily goals. It is comical to see twenty- and thirty-year-old adults crammed into desks meant for pubescent pre-teens. There are days, most days, when it feels like we have slipped on the polished tile floor, hit our heads, and woken up to find that the last decade or two has washed away like a dream, and that we were still middle schoolers, awkward and lonely. We feel the same way as those students probably do. We ask ourselves why we have to do this. We question our lack of power and autonomy. We count the minutes until the next bathroom break, or until lunch, or until we can leave for the day. We wonder if anything we do inside this school will ever matter to us or anyone else.

Someone has wheeled a big box TV on a cart into the cafeteria. We eat our lunches while it plays the midday news on mute. Sonia nudges my arm and points with her chin at the TV. On the screen, there is an image of the apartment building across the street from mine and a reporter standing in front of it. The captions cross the screen in delayed, incomplete bursts. THREE-YEAR-OLD CHILD… LEFT ALONE… MOTHER AWAY… PRONOUNCED DEAD ON THE SCENE… SIGNS OF HEAT ILLNESS. The news story catches the attention of other

graders and conversations pick up like dust on dry winds. How awful is that? A mother should have known better. I've seen this news story three times already. No one is reporting about the deaths in the tent cities. No one is dying in those neighborhoods up north, or in Scottsdale or Paradise Valley. What's going to happen to the mother? How can she live with herself? I don't know what I'd do if I lost one of my babies. Happens every year. People lose their damn minds over this heat. They need to be more careful. Careful of what? There's no escaping this.

It's Friday, and Sonia leaves right after work to spend her weekends down in Tucson. Her sister is getting married in September. There is a lot to do.

You should try the weed this weekend, she says as we are walking out of Dead Meadows.

Sonia thinks my insomnia can be cured or at least alleviated with some recreational marijuana use. She's gifted me two pre-rolled blunts. I haven't smoked weed since high school when my friend was house-sitting for her neighbor. We smoked in the backyard and I thought the sky with its stars and moon was going to fall down on top of me at any moment. I kept my feet flat on the ground, my knees raised, in case I needed to jump up and run back into the house.

I'll think about it, I say to Sonia.

Which means you won't, she says.

No, probably not.

I'm awake when the sun rises at five-thirty in the morning. I'm awake for the next few hours until I can carry my bag of library books to the circulation desk and beg for renewals. Next month, I will start my first semester of graduate school and at the beginning of the summer I got a list of the books I would need to read for my Great American Novels seminar. Hawthorne,

Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Morrison. I checked them out from the public library and then I didn't read them and every three weeks I bring them back to the library and check them out again. The librarians are nice about it, apologize for not having an online renewal system yet, though they say they are working on it. I am one of the first people in the library on Saturday mornings.

Outside on the corner, a street preacher repeatedly shouts into a bullhorn HELL IS COMING! He holds a sign that says WARNING TO ALL, HELL AWAITS. According to the sign, hell awaits for the fornicators, adulterers, sodomites, lesbians, Muslims, masturbators, sabbath breakers, porno freaks, drunkards, idolaters, hypocrites, atheists, pot-heads, baby-murderers, thieves, gossips, liars, and homosexuals. I make a mental list of which groups I fit in to. As I walk away, the preacher changes his sermon slightly to HELL IS HERE! HELL IS HERE! HELL IS HERE! A few minutes after nine in the morning, it is already almost a hundred degrees.

Instead of sleeping, I keep checking on the news story about the child. I routinely look out my window, as if more information will be standing there on the street. I watch news clippings online, anything to do with the heat, which is practically all the local stations are covering. Nothing mentions the apartment building across the street. One clip shows a time-lapsed video of cookies baking on the dashboard of a parked car. Another shows eggs cooking in a skillet left on the pavement. One local station has their own reporters, camera operators, and even interns documenting their own experiences with the heat. Shaky phone camera videos of our favorite news anchors sweating on their couch or sticking their heads in their freezers. They're just like us.

On Sunday, I call my mom as part of our arrangement. Two summers ago, we hadn't spoken or seen each other in almost half a year, and when she finally did hear from me, it was a doctor calling to say I had been admitted to Northwestern Memorial Hospital for acute exhaustion. Now, we talk every Sunday afternoon. I ask her if she knows about the signs for heat stroke or heat exhaustion, and before she can answer, I tell her that the two conditions share a lot of the same symptoms: dizziness, headache, fatigue, nausea, and confusion. The main difference is in appearance. For a heat stroke, people tend to have red, blotchy skin that is warm to the touch. For heat exhaustion, the skin is cold and pale. For both, if the body's internal temperature does not lower quick enough, they can result in death.

Have you been sleeping, Robbie? My mom's voice is measured on the other line.

I've been sleeping on and off since Friday afternoon, I tell her. I leave out the part about furiously researching heat-related illnesses and about the child across the street. I do tell her about the street preacher and she laughs.

That heat makes people crazy, I guess, she says. She tells a story of hiking in Nevada with her father when she was in college. He didn't drink enough water, and passed out, and my mom had to drag him into the shade and revive him.

I remember he was really pale, she says.

Heat exhaustion, I say, as if I am being quizzed. I forget who we are to one another, my mom and me, and ask if that is what he died from. I forget I know all the answers.

No, my mom responds plainly. Prostate cancer. Six years later.

We hang up and I call my brother Riley and leave him a voicemail, where I again explain the difference between heat stroke and heat exhaustion, and tell him to make sure he's drinking enough water, and I ask if it's hot in Virginia where he's living, and then, because I have run out

of things to say, I tell him the story our mother just told me about the grandfather we never really knew.

The essays we grade are mostly the same. Students are asked to read a passage of text and analyze the author's argument. Most do a passable job. Occasionally, one is particularly good, but we are discouraged from giving anyone top marks. A lot of them are incomplete, students running out of time. Some are too hard to read because of their handwriting. Some are blank. Some students write something else entirely. Writing that feels like diary entries, about how Sarah slept with Brian and now Brian is telling everyone she has crabs or about the girl in class who definitely got a boob job last summer or about someone cutting their wrists in the bathroom after lunch. Some students just write about the testing room they are in, somewhere in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, or Texas. They write about the exam proctor who has their pants tucked into their socks or smells like spoiled milk. One just said FUCK YOU! written across the page in big letters. I laughed when I read that one, and Nicole glared at me from the front of the room. Some write apologies in the margins for not knowing the answers and I try to give them more points. One student wrote that this essay is pointless, because this a college acceptance test, and they were never going to go to college. Some of their essays are crinkled in certain spots from tears or spit. They are easy to distinguish between after a while; the tears are smaller and are in near perfect circles on the page while the spit is larger and irregular. There is nothing on the rubric regarding tears or spit, so it goes mostly unnoticed by anyone but us.

Sonia is back and we return to the movies. We are still watching the same apocalyptic thriller. A family is separated as the Earth's core begins to heat up. They must make their way to

some futuristic ark that will protect only the richest and most elite in the world. The movie is two hours long and takes place over three days. It is a quick apocalypse with a PG-13 rating.

Sonia tells me about her sister's wedding and how her relatives are going insane about it. The number of guests keeps growing while the size of the venue stays the same. She asks me if I want to go with her as her date and I tell her I will have to check my school schedule. I think some of our coworkers think that Sonia and I are dating. Sonia has only ever dated girls and I've only ever slept with guys. If they don't think we are dating, they assume that Sonia and I are related. We look so much alike that we could be siblings. Our skin is the same color. Our eyebrows have the same shape. Our hair curls in the same way. We both have long fingers and oval-shaped palms. Her father is Mexican and her mother is Tohono O'odham. Sonia is my first Native friend besides my brother, but I haven't told her that. Sonia grew up visiting her family on the reservation near Tucson and has a great aunt who still speaks their language. Sonia knows that I am Choctaw and that my brother is Choctaw, but I haven't told her that everything I know about my people has come from research on the internet and the occasional book I can find at a library. I am still working through the confusion of not feeling Native enough. Sometimes I pretend Sonia is a real sibling or cousin of mine, that we have grown up together instead of just being coworkers at a summer job. I pretend the stories she tells about her family are about our family. I imagine what it would be like to experience her stories like memories, for us to speak in fragments, filling in the blanks with what we both remember.

Nicole asks me hang back after grading on Wednesday. Sonia makes an expression at me, asking if she should stay, and I shake my head.

Your essay numbers were down last week, Nicole says.

She stays seated at the teacher's desk and I stand awkwardly above her. I don't know what to do with my hands. I leave them at my side like a tin soldier and say nothing.

Nicole never shares our projected goals for essays graded, and never tells us how many in total we have completed. I used to keep track myself, but I gave up after a few weeks. The numbers that Nicole shares are only ever down or up. Mostly down. I try to think of any particular day that felt lighter than usual, but nothing comes to mind.

I'm sure this job doesn't mean much to you, Nicole says.

This is a ten-week temporary grading job. I keep that thought to myself.

But for some of us, she continues, it's all we can get.

She makes a scene out of reorganizing the papers on her desk, and from where I stand above her, I can see a ring of grey hairs growing around her hairline.

You live alone, don't you, Robin? Nicole continues before I can answer. And rent is crazy here nowadays, but you have just you to worry about, right? For better or worse, it's easier to fail yourself. I have rent to pay, too, and two growing daughters, who eat too much food and grow out of clothes too quickly and take dance classes that cost too much, not to mention the specific tights, and dance shoes, and makeup for their shows that makes them look like little prostitutes. And their dad doesn't really help with any of that. So, you miss your numbers, and that reflects on me, and I could lose my job. And then I've failed them. And that can't happen.

Nicole waits until that moment to meet my eyes. She's planned this, in some way, her words dripping with a tacky sense of power that feels even more sickly in the middle school classroom. Maybe this is what she says to everyone with low grading numbers.

It won't happen again, I say before I can stop myself.

Glad to hear it, Nicole responds, and dismisses me.

When Sonia asks me what Nicole wanted to talk about, I say I don't know, but I don't think it really had anything to do with me.

When I was in the hospital in Chicago, the doctors asked me a series of leading questions that were meant to discern if my exhaustion was self-afflicted.

Are you afraid of what will happen while you are sleeping? Do you feel at odds with the rest your body requires?

I do not remember my answers, but they were not damning enough to warrant a stay in a psychiatric facility. They did however warrant a job resignation, a broken lease, and moving in with my mom in Ohio. We spent the better part of a year flickering around each other in the kitchen or on the stairs. She convinced me to see a neurologist. I had three MRIs done that year. I had my blood drawn at every appointment. I wore a heartrate monitor for two weeks. All inconclusive.

Sometimes, these things have no explanation, the doctor said. It could be any number of environmental factors. And with your family's history, it's also likely genetic. A whole family tree of insomniacs. The doctor chuckled. My mom and I said nothing on the drive home and she cancelled all further appointments.

My mom became convinced that my lifestyle was the problem. She woke me up at six in the morning every day and made me run with her. She switched us from vegan diets to sugar-free to keto to paleo and then to gluten-free. We tried switching to decaf coffee and herbal teas, but we only made it three days. We mediated in the afternoons and she banned alcohol from the house. I played along, to let her try and fix this.

Through all of it, I was sleeping more, but only a handful of hours at a time. She was the exact same way, but did not enjoy the irony when I pointed this out to her.

I've never ended up in the hospital because of it, she said. There was something in her voice then, something you could have mistaken for pride if it weren't for the fear.

When I told her I had gotten into grad school in Arizona, she asked me to explain it to her. She sat on the edge of the bed and asked me what I would be doing and why I couldn't do it here. I pointed to the stack of books that had accumulated in the guest bedroom in the past seven months. I didn't have any answers for why not here other than Arizona was where I got in. I tried to say something about loss, about insomnia being a kind of emptiness that I was carrying around with me. I tried to say something about not having enough language to stay. I didn't know how to explain that I had to go somewhere where neither of us had been in order to understand who I was, who I would continue to be.

I think I just have to go, I said.

My mom stayed seated on the edge of the bed. She spoke to me in a clear voice, even and melodic, as she told me that my dad used to leave for a couple days at a time and just drive. He would drive for hours in one direction and sleep in his car and then drive back. He almost made it all the way to Oklahoma once.

I don't think you or Riley ever noticed, because he always worked night shifts, she said. There were times where neither of you would see him for a few days at a time anyways because he was always either working or sleeping. He couldn't ever explain it to me, where he was going and why, other than just saying that he had to go.

My mom echoed my own words back to me using the voice of my father. It was a shadow-puppet conversation. There was no hurt in her voice when she said this. They had been

divorced for many years at that point. Neither of us speak to him anymore. I think Riley still picks up the phone on birthdays and holidays, but if he doesn't mention to my mother or me.

My mom stayed in an abusive marriage for many years because she believed that it was best for her sons to grow up with their father. I could never blame her for that, even when I felt angry enough to do so. During one of those nights when I lived with her in Ohio, when we ran out of meditations and diets, we started talking. We pulled stories out of our throats. When I said something about growing up with an abusive father, my mom became quiet.

I never thought about it as abuse for you and your brother, my mom said. It never occurred to me.

I tried to not to show my hurt on my face. I was knocked off balance. An anger that I thought I had left behind felt within reach again.

I was in such a state of emergency, a state of survival, she continued, I never saw it. I never meant for you boys to grow up like that in that house.

That house that we all grew up in was a different house for each of us. I ran away from that house in Indiana, from my both parents and my brother, out of anger and fear. I ran out into a world I wasn't ready for and convinced myself that I could only survive in it if I was alone. I thought a busy, compulsive world meant that I had left the house behind. But there it was, seated between my mom and me in her guest bedroom in Ohio: the house was small and inside it there were four little dolls that we couldn't take out.

Before I left for Arizona, she came up with the arrangement.

Phone calls every Sunday, she said. You miss a call, I get on a plane.

Okay, I said.

And you're home for Christmas.

Okay.

The local news station releases an article stating that the mother of the child from across the street has been charged with negligent homicide. I have set up web alerts for the apartment building's address, so the article arrives directly in my email inbox. I read it over three times, and then spend a few hours researching Arizona's laws on manslaughter and criminal negligence.

She could get up to eight years in prison, I text Sonia.

Sonia asks if I should be worrying about this as much as I am.

I think back to that first day when I saw the ambulance, and make a list of all the other things it could have been. I try to only list emergencies that someone could survive. A concussion from tripping on the stairs. A panic or anxiety attack. An accidental cut or burn. An allergic reaction. A mild stroke or seizure. Being bitten by a dog. Domestic abuse.

I reread the article and realize it doesn't say if the mother was arrested or not, if she is being held in a jail cell or if she is sitting over there in her apartment. I look across the street and try to guess which apartment is hers. All the windows are dark. The whole building is in mourning.

I think about before, when the mother was anonymous to me and the rest of the city. She still is, technically. The news has not released any photos or named her or her child. But we know of her now. I wonder which of the children I had seen playing in the street might have been hers. I try to recall the faces of the women I've seen coming in and out of the building. There was a woman with a long black braid and one who had her arm in a sling for a few weeks. There was a woman who was so short I thought she was a child at first. There was a woman who was

likely too old to have a three-year-old child but maybe she was a relative, an aunt or a grandmother.

The mother and I walk past each other in the supermarket. She has the same brand of yogurt in her cart as I do. We stand in line together at the library. She rolls her eyes at the street preacher out on the corner and counts all the reasons hell is waiting for her, too. She is a hypocrite, a gossip, a liar, and masturbator. She's in the audience at the movie theatre, watching the same movie over and over again. She sits across from me on the bus, as we both ride in the same direction.

I see her everywhere, a grieving mother I construct out of every single woman that I see. People catch me staring and squint their eyes. The mother of the child would recognize that I am looking for her and would not avert my gaze. Sonia tells me that I have to leave it alone, I'm not helping myself or the mother by acting this way. I ask her what I should do to help.

Nothing, she says. You can't help her.

Riley calls me back and leaves a voicemail while I'm at work. He says he already heard that story about our grandfather and that he is drinking enough water but will look out for signs of a heat stroke anyways. He says it is not as hot in Virginia as it is in Arizona, but that the humidity is sticking to him.

We can't get away from it, he says.

My brother speaks in plurals. He is single again, but still doing it, making more of himself. Or fitting himself into the world. I wonder if it works. Riley is two years younger than me and has had his own kind of exhaustions in his life, but he seems to manage it all so much better. He works hard and his life has rhythm.

I try his plural-speak, try to imagine who I might be speaking for when I talk like this, me and the desert, me and the mountains, me and the library books. I call and leave another voicemail that says we miss you, we hope you are doing well, we would like to visit sometime, even if that sounds impossible to us. At the end, we ask him how he's been sleeping.

The temperatures cool off some but are still above a hundred degrees. There is no more news about the child in the apartment across the street since the article detailing the mother's charges. The news channels have stopped reporting on that case and have starting reporting on new ones. Updates come to us from the neighborhood, from what people have heard or made up. The mother was just sleeping in the other room. The mother was out of the apartment. The mother left for work and the babysitter was on her way. The mother left for a few minutes to get groceries. The mother never came home from the night before. The mother works hard or does drugs or never should have had that kid anyways. The AC unit malfunctioned. The AC unit fell out the window. The AC unit was working fine, just wasn't strong enough. The power company turned off their electricity the night before, two days before, a week before. The power company never called with a warning. The power company gave their standard two-week warning and called the number on file six times before turning off the electricity. The power company turned off their power because of an unpaid balance of a hundred dollars, of fifty dollars, of one dollar and seventy-five cents. It was a dollar and seventy-five cents that killed that child. The child was supposed to be at their grandparents, at daycare, at their father's. He was a boy named Elias or Noah or Axel. She was a girl named Alana or Marie or Raven.

It is the mother's fault. It is the landlord's fault. It is the power company's fault. It is the city's fault. No one blames the sun or the Earth or the generations. No one blames the

meteorologists or the engineers or the urban planners. No one blames God or Jesus or the President, and we don't blame each other. We don't know what to believe. We will deny it if it is said to us, but the facts of the case never really matter. The facts of the case do not save the child, and they do not save the mother and they do not save the hundred other heat-related deaths recorded this year. The facts matter to the mother, and perhaps they matter to her lawyer, if she has one, but to us, the watchers, we tell ourselves we only care that it happened. All heat deaths are preventable deaths, we say in unison. And we prevent nothing.

I can't contain my worries to just the mother anymore. She's not here, not mine, a pinprick of empty space, and these obsessions overflow and tear through that hole. I spend my nights sitting on the couch in just my boxers with my laptop open between my legs. I click through tabs of articles on various subjects: neighborhood zoning in Phoenix; endangered species of the American Southwest; the introduction of horses to the North American continent; the ozone layer hole over Antarctica; radiation half-lives; pollinator die-offs; the universe reaching maximum entropy. By three or four o'clock in the morning, my temples feel as though they are in a vice clamp. I solidify hell's promise, according to the street preacher, and masturbate until I fall asleep.

On the phone, I tell my mom all of it. Honesty is my only way through this, I think. I tell her about the child across the street, and about my recent obsessions. I stutter my way through half the articles I have saved. I feel like a child again, encountering knowledge for the first time and running to share it. My mom interrupts to ask if I am sleeping, and I say yes, yes, I'm sleeping, but the world is ending.

You used to worry about these things when you were a kid, she says. You would climb into my bed at two a.m., panicked, like the world was falling apart around you.

What did you do when I came to you like this? I ask.

I put you back to bed.

There is a story from a book of English fairy tales we read growing up about Henny Penny and the falling sky. An acorn falls on Henny Penny's head and she thinks the sky is falling and goes to warn the king. She causes a mass panic amongst her bird friends, who travel with her. They come across a fox, who takes advantage of their collective hysteria. He tricks them Henny-Penny and her friends into going into his lair, where he eats them. I was never sure of the lesson there. I research the origin of the fairytale, likely Dutch, and find that in some versions, Henny Penny dies along with her friends in the fox's lair, but in others, she lives, escapes to her nest, and never warns the king that the sky is falling. But she always believes it. No one ever convinces her that it's not true, that it was just an acorn. In every version of the story, it was always true for her. The sky was really falling. The end of the world lies firmly in the seed of an oak tree.

Sonia and I are still watching the same movie. It is well over the twentieth time we've seen it but today the images are making me sick. I am about to ask if we can switch to a different movie tomorrow when Sonia tells me she is moving back home.

I can't stand my roommates, Sonia says. And I can't keep living here.

On screen, a volcano erupts in the middle of a suburb.

I miss my family, and with my sister moving out soon, there's room for me back home.

A tsunami decimates a coastal city.

I thought for a long time that I had failed. I'm not entirely sure that I haven't.

Wildfires cover miles and miles of forests.

I'm so lonely.

The final image of the movie is the family, miraculously all alive and on the ark, holding one another, as an entire continent sinks under water. The credits roll.

I offer to help her pack. She says thanks, but she's selling most of her stuff. Her parents don't have room for it.

You can still be my date to my sister's wedding, she offers. I tell her I still have to check my schedule.

We have two weeks of grading left, and Sonia tells me she's moving once we are done. We do everything the same. We go to work. We go to the theatre in the afternoons. We've switched to a heist movie. I go back to the library to renew my books. Our lives continue in concentric circles.

On our last day of grading, Nicole brings in a grocery store sheet cake after lunch. It says CONGRATULATIONS across the top in blue icing and has a plastic graduation cap sticking out of the top. Nicole tells us our team graded the most essays this summer.

I know I was hard on you guys, but we did great work, she says.

Someone asks if we are going to receive any compensation for grading the most essays, for being the most productive team, and Nicole makes a gesture towards the cake. No one says anything, until Sonia lets out a full-bellied laugh. Before we finish our cake, Nicole reminds us that we have three more hours of grading to do before we leave.

I invite Sonia up to my apartment to smoke the two blunts she gave me after our last movie together.

I won't do it without you, probably, I say.

We lay on the carpet of my living room under the ceiling fan on full blast. Talking feels like chewing scraps of leather. Every ten seconds, I have to remind myself what is happening. We don't remember what we say. We don't remember who we are. We spend most of the night in silence. At some point, Sonia begins counting, one, two, three, four, and she's made it all the way to four-hundred and fifty-eight before I fall asleep.

I keep waking up every couple of hours and I can't tell if I am dreaming. All the lights are still on. Sonia is sleeping on the couch with a blanket pulled over her head. I can feel my heartbeat in my temples and in the tips of my fingers. I go to the bathroom and splash some water on my face. In the mirror, it looks like it is my skin is dripping off into the sink, not the water. I turn off the lights, put an extra blanket on Sonia, and lie in bed until the sun comes up.

In the morning, Sonia asks me to come with her to Tucson for a few days. She's headed down there the day after tomorrow, and I have a week before my classes start.

I don't think I can, I say. I make a gesture to my apartment around me, as if this living room consist of everything my life can be. I open my mouth to say more and there's nothing there. My mind is still dense from the night before. My thoughts leap off their edges and I never see where they land.

Sonia pulls me into a hug. Her grip on me is so tight that I see stars in my eyes until she lets go.

In two days, Sonia calls me to say she's leaving and that she wants to stop by and say goodbye. I am asleep and miss her call. By the time I call her back, she is already in Tucson with her family, and she misses my call. I don't attend her sister's wedding but I send a gift off their registry. A thank you card comes from Sonia instead of her sister. I call her again and she answers. I tell her I am sorry about before.

I was stuck. You were stuck. We're ok, she says.

The school year begins, and the middle schoolers reinhabit their desks at Dead Meadows. They don't anything about SAT essays yet or temporary jobs or how to distinguish between tears and spit on paper. I go to my own classes and renew my books again. The street preacher is still there every Saturday and hell, it seems, is still coming. I lose some of my obsessions from over the summer. I occasionally still look up information on the ozone layer hole. Scientists say it might be closed by 2050. I check on the case of the child across the street, but there has been no news since early August. I call my mom on Sundays and leave voicemails for my brother every couple of weeks.

The other graders find new jobs or return to old ones. Nicole stays on with the college board and keeps managing teams of essay graders. She does not know that we are two years away from a global pandemic, which will lead to college entrance exams becoming impossible to administer and almost obsolete. When they do return, the college board reassesses the exam and removes the essay portion altogether. Everything is important until it isn't.

After months, I receive an alert that the trial date is set in mid-November for the mother in the apartment across the street. A public defender is assigned to her case, and then the trial is postponed. In January, with no trial, her case is dropped, and she is acquitted of all charges of negligent homicide in the case of her child's death. No further information is released regarding the nature of the death. No one else is accused. No one receives any blame.

The mother and her child's names and photos are released then. She had a son. I do not recognize them. I keep an eye on the apartment across the street, hoping and dreading to see her. I never do. She must have moved.

I still only sleep a handful of hours at a time. On the night when I learn that the mother's charges have been dropped, I pick up my research from the summer. 182 people died last year due to heat-related complications. All heat deaths are preventable deaths, Sonia says over the phone. I pour over climate reports from the National Weather Service, first for Arizona, and then for Ohio and Virginia. It's late, or rather early, and after giving myself a rudimentary education in meteorology and climate science, after recalling the plot of the apocalypse movie Sonia I watched over and over again last summer, after reading summaries of what each major religion says about the end of the world, I ask myself who I am trying to save. I begin to count out loud, to break up the empty night: one, two, three, four. It's two o'clock in the morning, and the part of the world that belongs to us is asleep. It's three o'clock in the morning, and we enter into a new world, one for the sleepless, for the watchers, for those of us who are empty and afraid. It's four o'clock in the morning, and we are still awake, staring at the ceiling, hoping it won't fall down on top of us.

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