A Good Hiding Place

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The Understudy

She almost looks like my mother. Even my brother doesn't know the difference. She sounds good, he says, after getting off the phone, like his diagnosis is enough. The understudy lives with my father on country land, in a remote town in Texas that wouldn't register on a scale. No one lives there. She really only has him to convince. When I ask my father, Are you sure it's really her? he says, You bet.

I want to know for myself. I don't tell anyone I'm coming. It takes me three days to drive from New York. At dinner, I play along while my "mother" rearranges the food on her plate with her fork, and my father carries the conversation. He gives her away. After dinner, I ask if he doesn't mind if I move the guns and ammunition that are taking up the better part of their bedroom floor and set them in his closet. She could trip over them, I say. He says, What are you doing here?

That night while he is in his office I crawl into bed with her, and we lie together in the dark and I hold her hand, and she decides to trust me. It takes so little. She turns on her

side and looks up at me with a shyness I don't recognize, her grey eyes like wet stones. Tell me a story, she says. What kind? I ask. Tell me about her.

My Mother Dreams

When I was a child, my mother had a dream. She was sitting at a large dining table, where on either side was her sister and brother, her mother and stepfather, when her father walked into the room. He was wearing a fine suit, the best she'd ever seen. It was grey, smooth as a good skipping stone. In every way his appearance was new, refined. In life, in dream, he was dead. In life, in dream, he was decaying and smelled awfully, like a smelly carcass, my mother said, when she was describing the dream to me. With the look of life, the smell of death, he entered the dining room where they were sitting.

Dad? my young mother asked. Is that you? She was afraid. He shouldn't be there, or anywhere at all.

It's me, he said. I've come here to warn you, and your family. I don't want any of you to end up where I am, in hell.

She told me this dream, this warning. I was a child, of what age, I'm not sure. Old enough to remember, to only have been told this dream once and still remember it, clearly.

It was the same with the dream of her mother, my grandmother. How uncharacteristically wistful she was in dream, a look of elegance my mother had never known her to have in life. In life, it was always nervous, shivery fear and poverty, but in dream she was feminine, even delicate. She sang as she walked, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiastes…

Ecclesiastes? my mother asked her. Which verse?

All of them, her mother said, playfully, as though my mother had asked her something childish, irrelevant. Ecclesiastes, one-thousand!

I have never dreamed like my mother, in a way that so easily slipped into her life, how she had lived from dream to dream, like a path of stones to get through a river. A path she led me through. How she would wake me up with her dreams, and tell me what she had seen, so that her dreams would go on, and not end with her waking. Not end with her life.

It was always this way. It still is. Though what do I say now. It all bleeds together.

Once, she and I were in the hallway. I was ten, maybe. I'd come out of my room and she had come out of hers, and something kept us there, stilled, in each others' eyes.

Mom? I said, and I watched as that word changed her face, as though she had only in that moment considered the possibility. This wasn't a dream, it was lupus. It was her life. Do you see what I mean?

Asleep or Awake

Play with me, my mother said, from the hospital bed. One of her hands was in a lasso motion while the other was wrapped around a large stuffed dog. St. Bernadette, protector of her lap. I played with her. She wanted me to neigh like a horse and whirl my lasso. For some reason, the phrase *to infinity and beyond* came to her mind. I said it with her so she would laugh. I swung my rope and neighed, setting the scene in which we would ride off together, forever. None of this came naturally to me. I've played with so few children. I hid my wet face in laughter. If for a moment I stopped, she rapped her fist on the bedside table. Play with me, she said, and I grabbed my rope again.

Her toes looked out from the bottom of the covers, red and green. It was February. When I covered her in blankets, she wanted the feet to be left out. Usually she would want her shoes on, the felt slip-ons that were a gift, with the images of her dogs embroidered on the top. To have these on, always, in bed, so she would be ready. She thought she would be raptured away any minute. If she didn't ask for her shoes, I didn't remind her.

Overnight, while I slept in the bedside chair, she was given the skill of guitar. She wanted to show me. Put on some music, she said. I turned the radio on and watched as she stepped into it, and with great seriousness thrummed an invisible guitar as though it was something you could play that way, body as instrument.

When the song ended, she nodded, raised her eyebrows. “I know,” she said. “I’m as surprised as you are.”

As we waited for the next song to come on, one of the radio DJs neighed. He said “neighbors,” like a horse.

. . .

On her way to the hospital, my mother had told me that I needed to reschedule my dentist appointment. When the office couldn’t reach me, they called her. She answered on the way to the hospital, and then she messaged me.

It was January, the sky was a lightless white, and her lungs were full of fluid. Her kidneys were failures, they were scarred and shriveled, though she had gone in for the fluid, and was coughing up material that looked like it might have fingernails, a heartbeat. Her

kidneys were in stage four and five before we knew they were stage anything. This would be the first time we heard of this disease, when it was over.

She was on a liver transplant list, not a kidney list. The doctor my mother has only ever referred to as Anne Bancroft, I don't know if she ever learned her real name, said that kidney failure is a silent killer. You don't see it coming.

I learned that my mother was in the hospital from my father, hours after hearing that I needed to reschedule my dentist appointment.

When I got his message, I called him. If he would just start from the beginning. She was normal on Friday. On Saturday, she slept for twenty hours. It was Wednesday.

I'll be there tomorrow, I said. I'll fly in first thing.

She's a one-eighty from this morning, he said. She'll probably only be here for two or three days, until the pneumonia clears. She hasn't been taking her medicine. She hasn't been seeing a doctor like she should.

I didn't let it overcome me, the surreality in which she had not been ravaged by lupus for as long as I'd known her, and would only be in the hospital for the time it took a person with stage negative kidneys to recover from pneumonia. My only thought was to reach her. I had already passed through my father, like an arrow.

I didn't have the means to reach her, but Martin did, my partner. There were only some ways that he and I had an age, that we were fourteen years apart. When I asked him, he didn't think twice. Because of him, I could fly to her.

I lay on our couch in New York, my head in his lap. I looked out the window and saw nothing. I was all wet and flowing, salt from my eyes, blood from my groin, where Eve was reaching out for Adam, she never thought her sins would stain the underwear of her daughters, and her daughters' daughters… when she called me. It was like being called from the other side. It was like the first phone call ever made. Her voice barely sounded through the wind of her breath.

We don't have to talk, I said. We can just breathe together. I'll be there soon. I'll be there tomorrow.

We were on the phone when the doctor asked, before turning out her light, if she would like to be resuscitated. The answer is yes, I said, loud enough for him to hear. We all laughed. I'm still feeling alive, thank you, she said. But ask me a few days ago, and it may not sound so bad.

. . .

It took three flights and a drive to make it to her. Twelve hours after getting on the plane in New York, my father picked me up in Louisiana and we drove two hours to Texas. There is a repurposed gas station nearer to them that planes do land and fly out of, but for the effort it is double the price. We drove in my mother's car with the radio off, by the light of the fluorescent yellow median. At that hour, I could only see the glimpse of road that appeared in the headlights as we moved through it.

"You know with my diabetes, my kidneys should really be like your mother's," he said, as we go onto the highway. But he'd seen a doctor recently and they told him his kidneys were, "quote, amazing."

I didn't consider how to get them out of him. There was a plastic spoon on the floor, a knife jutted from the cupholder. It was a waste. We both knew he didn't have my mother's blood, the most rare. The type that can give freely, but receive from very few.

It was past midnight when we arrived. The main doors were locked, so we went in through the emergency room. I walked with my father down long winding halls like the tunnels of a plastic ant farm. And then we were there, where she was, on the sixth floor. The good floor, I would understand later, when she was on another.

Soon my father left to take care of their dogs. He'd come back in the morning. When I'd settled under a thin white blanket in the bedside chair, and our bodies went out with the

light, and we were only voices, my mother said that she was glad to be there, at the hospital. She called it a vacation.

It's the vacation I need, she said.

In the morning my father returned with a sack of things for my mother. A radio so she could listen to music. Clean underwear, chocolates, a hairbrush.While I braided her hair, he told us there had been a committee of vultures blocking his way in the road out of town. He'd pulled over and gotten out of his car, to see what it was all about, and the weird thing was, there was no carcass. They were just gathered there, he said, blocking his way.

The physical therapist came in while he was telling us this. She walked past him and over to my mother, fastening a ratchet strap around her waist to maneuver her with, and they got to work. She had my mother sit and stand, march in place, breathe in and out of an imaginary straw. My mother was worn down before it began, but she was determined. She wanted to be good. When they finished their exercises, they went out for a walk in the hall.

Focus on the straw, the therapist told her, guiding my mother forward with the ratchet strap. With her IV pole in hand, and her white her gown now belted elegantly at the waist, walking at a parade's pace, my mother looked almost royal. I told her to give a little wave. She did. Together, they made two laps around the parameter of the nurse's station. The next day we'd try to get her to do three.

As we lay in the dark that night, I asked her if I was hearing dogs. They were whimpering just outside our door.

I think you're hearing me breathe, she said.

I listened. It was true, there was a strange, involuntary second breath after her regular one that sounded like dogs crying at the door. You want to know something weird, she said. Sometimes I'll think my breathing is someone talking to me. I can even think they're singing. I'll wait to hear if they repeat themselves, so I know it's just me.

Intermittently my mother was put on a breathing machine like my grandmother was on when she was alive, and I was a child. She had one in her bedroom that she plugged into at night, a small tank she wheeled behind her during the day. I can see it now, her strange pet. That woman who was always an extension of something else.

Now it was like my mother was playing the role of her mother, having never smoked a cigarette. It was that way with lupus. She acted out its premises. Sober, my mother had cirrhosis of the liver. She bled internally sitting still, and lived under sunglasses she wore even in dim light, even inside. Her bloody eyes like open wounds. The wounds through which she saw.

The breathing machine at the hospital had new cords, which the nurses hated. The cords were made of glass and wouldn't give like the plastic ones had, and would fall from the oxygen supply to the floor. So for a few seconds until I called a nurse in to fasten it again, my

mother was a little vacuum cleaner, sucking up whatever was beneath her bed. We said this to the nurse to make him laugh. He liked us right away. We told him the janitor didn't have to come by. She'd gotten it all.

In a plastic bucket that stayed in the toilet, the nurses measured her input and output to see how well she was working. My mother forgot what it was called and started referring to it as her "ass hat." It did look that way, if you turned her upside down.

I sat in the bedside chair researching vacations for us when this was all over. She'd heard good things about the Maldives. The Maldives, that's where we'd go. I leaned over and showed her what I'd found. Rooms that floated on the ocean. Towels shaped as elephants, monkeys, dogs. None of it was real. It was a way of saying, I'd do anything for you.

In the afternoon when the nurse came in to give my mother a bath, my father and I stepped out for a walk. In that light, it could have been any hour. Nurses followed alarms to the scare. Patients stared out of their rooms, openmouthed. My father put his arm around me.

We're not going to the Maldives, he said.

I thought about saying something else, but instead I told him the truth.

I know, I said.

We stopped by the elevators, and stood at the large window where a storm was gathering courage from the clouds. There was a television on the wall beside us stuck on a weather slide from years ago. It would be sunny from now on.

“I’ve been thinking about getting your mother on disability,” my father said.“I didn’t know about this, your uncle told me, but with a teacher’s retirement the spouse doesn’t get anything.” From our height I could see the other side of the hospital, where overfilled dumpsters spilled bags and bags of trash. A number to guess at a carnival.

“I guess there’s no incentive for her to die, then,” I said. He laughed. Smoke rose from the backs of buildings. I turned away from the window, and he followed me. “I wish I could give them to her,” he said on the way back to her room. His kidneys. “I wish I could too,” I said.

When we arrived, she was sitting up in the bedside chair with a white blanket in her lap that extended to the floor, and a white towel across her chest as a kind of bib to keep the dinner she was waiting for off her gown. The way she was sitting, dressed, I thought she looked like the Pope. I took her photo. I wanted her to last.

I was her secretary, her confidant. Messages that she stayed up all night drafting in her head, I wrote for her in the morning. As soon as I woke up, she was ready for me. She had been waiting. At some point in our time together, she started asking into the air, in the middle of the night, Asleep or Awake.

Asleep or Awake.

If I said Awake, she'd have something for me to write down. If I was asleep, or pretending to be, she might put her glasses on and write the message herself. In the morning, when I woke, she would want to read me what she'd written. As though some part of all of this wasn't about efficiency, but for me to be witness. Now as it was when I was child.

My earliest memories were her memories. What she revealed to me in car drives around town, just the two of us, my little feet swinging like bells beside her purse on the floor. What do I have in there, she would ask, when someone was begging on the corner. She said that a poor person might only have twenty dollars, something I didn't understand at the time. To be that rich and still live on the street.

I would hear many things on those drives that I didn't understand. I was a student in this way. The words came first, the meaning later. What I did understand is that our conversations were ours alone, not to be repeated, and that what you knew is different than how you acted. That to live was to court your killer, whatever it was that was after you.

An IV bag hovered over my mother while she slept, pumping her with fluid. Eight pounds of it gathered in her legs and they became hard, and enormous. She said her legs felt like scissor legs, the way they moved against each other now. She described it this way to the

doctor whose silvery hair was styled like Anne Bancroft's was in one of the few films my mother has seen. With films, it was like anything else. We wore them out. They were like shoes. We wouldn't get a new pair until wearing them out. And so we watched the same films hundreds of times, since there was nothing wrong with them.

With fluid, with medicine, her kidneys became worse. The numbers that we wanted to go down went up. Anne Bancroft told us that my mother had too many miles at this point. The car doesn't go back in miles. She was very hopeless with my mother, factual. I imagine she has pulled her share of plugs. When she came in the room, it felt like we needed to come up with more questions to delay her totaling my mother, selling her for parts. She was a very small woman. Her eyes were the biggest part of her body.

One day, my mother's numbers did go down. They went from from 4.5 to 3.3. We looked at the doctor like obedient dogs, to see if we could be let out. Anne Bancroft told us it was like stepping on a scale everyday. The number would vary. Anything over 1.4 wasn't good, even if it was better.

That was Scissor Legs, my mother said later, when passing gas. Her alter ego.

With the nephrologist, it was different. He would come into the room and close the door and sit down. It was like he had clocked out and was off work. Days later, when I would have

to leave, he would come in at night and talk with my mother until she was tired enough to sleep. He told her she was the kind of patient they all wanted. Someone who wanted to get better.

He told us he would need to stick a needle into my mother's kidney and pull it out to know what we were up against. He talked with us for a long time about how it would work, what we could hope for, every way it could go badly. There was a one-in-ten-thousand chance. This biopsy would show him the extent of her scarring, her failure. With that information, we could move forward. He wanted to schedule it for a few days out, just in case he changed his mind. He was a careful man. I liked him very much.

I don't know what I think of him now. I am still trying to understand what happened when I wasn't there.

I stayed with my mother for a week. On the night before I left, and neither of us could sleep, she asked me about the book I was writing. In the years I'd been writing, it was the first time we'd talked about it. I told her it began as a short story, about cats, but that it wasn't really about cats anymore, it was about her.

Will you mention daffodils? she asked.

Daffodils grew perennially in the yard of the house she lived in as a girl. I know this house from a photograph, and from a drawing I made from the photograph, in pencil. It's

hung on the wall of every kitchen she's lived in since I drew it in high school. There are no daffodils in the photograph. If there were, they'd be in my drawing.

"Nothing is ever perfect," she said. "No family ever is. But daffodils mark a time when we were all together, before it was all pulled out from under me."

When my mother was a child, her father would carry her with him everywhere he went to beg for money. She had siblings, but she was the youngest, the smallest. The one. He would walk right into the bank with her. He was a very tall man, my grandfather. An elephantine man I saw only twice in my life. A skyscraper of a man with thick, thick toenails, long enough to use for something. I can see my mother crouched over his feet on our back porch, clipping them. He didn't go anywhere without her on his waist.

One night, her family pulled into a gas station. Her father turned off the car, set the keys in the cupholder and, for the first time in history, walked inside alone. All of the kids were there in the car. So my mother's mother climbed over from the passenger seat and drove off, leaving him in the store. She drove straight to her mother's house, states away, and never saw her husband again.

"Your life takes so many turns," my mother said. "Other people turn you, and you're never where you thought you'd be. When I see daffodils, I see continuation, something that is the same." Then she said, "That's the story I want to write."

"You want to write?"

"I've always wanted to," she said. "I'd like to, when I retire."

On the morning of my departure, the lights were off. Her eyes were closed under a warm compress. She couldn't open her wounds. I lay at the foot of the bed, my wet head in her groin, my arms extended upward, holding both of her hands like balloons. She didn't see me leave. Only felt me let her go.

The road to the airport was clear and flat. The sky a blinding blue. Cows chewed at their feet. Trees, dead and alive, went nowhere. The vultures came up again.

When the plane lowered over New York that night, the buildings were the embers of a fire, dying out. I was lying in bed after midnight when I heard from her.

Asleep or Awake.

Awake, I wrote.

She called me. She told me that the nephrologist had come in that night and given her the results of the biopsy. It was successful, it wasn't all bad. They talked more about her life, of her dreams of a farm with happy chickens, unharmed by possums. He told her he'd like to see her through. They would keep on together, moving forward. She would be his patient. It would be his honor, he said. She had never felt so cared for, in her life, she said, as she had at the hospital.

In the days after, her number did what they couldn't. They went from 4.5 to 3.3, to 2.8, 2.1, 1.8, and 1.6. They went down. Anne Bancroft's big eyes had to blink. My mother was let out with good kidneys and lungs, and without pneumonia, and though she had hemorrhoids in her esophagus, they were for now dormant. Death had to step aside, let her through.

The nephrologist couldn't make sense of it, her lupus. He was so curious that he wanted to test her before she left, to be sure.

Her lupus had been diagnosed anecdotally at my birth, when she weighed less after delivering me than she had before becoming pregnant. The doctor told her he'd only seen this happen once, with a lupus patient. He told her she should go about her life as usual, as there was no cure, no reason to fight it. The river of her life has simply turned rapid. Let it run. She would see the changes in her forties. And it was just that simple, as though he had written it for her on the calendar.

The nephrologist's test came back as class four lupus. He typed up a letter for my mother to give to the school where she taught, recommending that she retire early, and not go back to work. She was relieved to be going home after weeks in the hospital, thinking it was the end.

. . .

A few days after her release, my father called. I was packing a bag to visit a friend who was nine-months pregnant. It was so close to the date, I might be with her when it happened. He was calling to see if I'd noticed anything different about my mother. I didn't know what he meant. He said that she was weeping incessantly to whoever would listen. One phone call after another. There was always someone else who needed to hear from her. She had a new phrase, World of pain. Everyone was in a world of pain. I thought about it. She had sounded that way to me. Like a drain had been blocked, and there was nowhere for her tears to go. She'd sounded underwater for days. But I didn't see it how he did.

It would be a lot, I told him, to have come back from the dead.

I know, he said. It's just. Weird.

Martin and I took the subway to the airport, and without signal I'd missed a call from an old friend of my mother. When we made it to our gate, I called her back. We'd never spoken on the phone before. She said that my mother had been calling the music teacher, the principal, the superintendent at her old district, people she hadn't spoken to in years, saying that Satan was after her. He was using her as a punching bag. She needed to get her messages out while my father was at work. She had to go around him. If everyone on the other end of the line would just move to where she lived in east Texas, they would form a community. She had the cash. She would pay for it all.

I stared into the tightly wound airport carpet. I thought about what my father had said, and my mother's friend, and my mother. Satan, punching bag. I found the number of the nephrologist, and left three voicemails. I called my brother George. He said, Why don't you call her and pretend you know nothing, see what happens.

It was something she taught me, dramatic irony. To live with what I know.

When I called, she answered normally. She told me one of her normal stories that had nothing do with Satan, or asking people to move to east Texas. I think that was the day the mailman had gotten stuck in their driveway after a rain, and had to be towed out. It wasn't until we were getting off the phone that she gave herself away.

Well, I'd better let you go, she said.

In the thousands of phone calls that have connected us my whole life, I have always been the one to cut the line. If it were up to her, we would always have the phone just sitting there, like a baby monitor.

The first group was being called to board. I quickly called my father and told him what I'd learned, and what would happen next. He would leave the car shop he managed and take her to the hospital. She might be afraid of him, she might think he is trying to kidnap her, I didn't know. I had only ever known what my mother would do, not her understudy. He did what I said. He wrapped up what was left to do at work, and called her to let her know that he was coming home early and that they would be going back to the hospital.

Okay, she said, without question. When my father arrived at their house an hour later, she was waiting for him, in the car.

There was a period of time I had to go dark, when I was on the plane. When we landed, I called her. She and my father were in the emergency room.

How are you feeling, I asked her.

I'm getting a rush of memories, of information, she said. Things you'll know one day. We have a lot of things to talk about. Ada, listen to me, she said, lowering her voice. There's going to be a five billion dollar donation, because they killed her.

They? I thought. Killed who? I said.

Susannah, she said, incredulously. She was only sixteen years old, my mother said. She loved to sing, she loved music. They're re-opening her case. She's in the room with me now.

I told her I needed her to hold on, to her life, to me.

I'm not dying, she said.

I know. You keep not dying, and hand dad the phone.

Did you hear all that? I asked him.

Yep, he said.

About Susannah?

Yep.

Before the night in the emergency room was up, we heard that they would keep her, and wean her off of the steroids they thought were inducing a psychosis. The steroids the nephrologist had prescribed to help her out of kidney failure, pneumonia. I could stop my wailing as though she'd already died. It helped me to know she was in the hospital, that she was being taken care of.

The next day Martin and I drove to where my friend lived, where she was any day going to have a little girl. Bernadette. When my mother was first in the hospital, when I'd left and her sister took my place, it was Valentine's day. My father got her a surrogate dog to hold in the bed. She named the stuffed animal St. Bernadette, protector of her lap, for my friend.

We drove to her house, and there she was, middle-expanded, warm, my good friend Malina, and it was snowing everywhere, it was still February and the great pond in her backyard was frozen over. Her husband was working on the bathroom, the incoming child's room, he wore overalls, a beard, a light on his hat, he was working up until the child was born, getting everything ready.

Malina and I flowed into our own world, easy, like sisters. I taught her to knit with chopsticks and some thin rope she had laying around. We made borscht while her husband played the toy piano and Martin stared at books through his glasses, importantly. We slept through a storm of snow, silently erasing the footprints from the day before.

In the morning, during a game of chess, a cardinal flew into the kitchen window. I had thought of this when I woke up, and there was a bloody stain on the window beside my bed. It hit at a good time. I was losing. Without a word, Malina and I left the pieces where they were and walked outside to the place where it fell. It was splayed in the snow like an angel. Malina bent down and saw that its little heart was still going. She went inside and found a shoebox and handed me a magazine to rip pieces from for its nest. She put her hand inside to test if it was comfortable enough, then set the bird in it outside. It didn't take her long to beat me after that. When we came back to check on it, the box was empty.

While I was with her, I was calling my brother, my father, the nurses, her siblings, my mother's friends from our hometown and her new friends in east Texas. I kept everyone on the same page, mostly. There were some things I couldn't relay. How she was seeing angels, demons, celebrities. She had given birth to George, again, pulling his head out herself from in between her legs. She wasn't sleeping at night, but rattling off to herself, to no one, like an auctioneer.

At night, she would weep with Mother Mary, and they would comfort each other. They were one and the same. She knows how I've felt sometimes, my mother said. When I've thought that my son isn't good enough.

For weeks I wasn't there and the days without her went on. I don't know how they did, but they did. I remember telling someone that I didn't think I could go on, I really and truly didn't, and they asked, then why are you eating? And so I knew, I must want to go on.

I learned about her through my father. In calls or messages every few hours, I asked for news. They had taken her phone away. Her sword and shield. Without it she could no longer carry out the will of God. What He commanded her to do she could no longer fulfill. Her friends wouldn't know to make preparations on their property in anticipation of her return, like the Messiah.

I reached my mother through my father. I called, and he passed her the phone. We didn't talk anymore. She only spoke into the phone like it was a radio. With a graveness I didn't recognize, without humor, without love, she delivered her messages until she was done. I would know it was over when she said, Okay?

She was the mother of Christ, the whore of Babylon, the cornerstone of the millennium, a horseman of the apocalypse.

"And you are, too, do you get it?" she asked, suddenly, remembering there was someone on the other end. Remembering me.

"I don't know," I said.

"Sometimes I'm the mother, sometimes I'm the daughter. Sometimes I'm the mother, sometimes I'm the daughter. Sometimes I'm the mother, sometimes I'm the daughter. Okay? Do you get it?"

When we got off the phone, my father wrote me. Do you remember that 'Asleep or Awake' thing your mother was doing with you in the hospital?

Of course.

Now she's saying, 'Mother or Daughter, Mother or Daughter.'

Play With Me

The Lord calls us to be little children. To have faith that untidy, simple. I try to remember this. That even in madness, there is something familiar. Even in madness, pattern.

I have thought seriously of the possibility of being driven to madness. If a person's only way out is in. I've considered whether it was something that has always belied my mother, madness, like an understudy in waiting for its day. The truth is, it happened overnight. She was my mother and then she was not. They sent her through machines that saw no reason why. Machines that saw my mother. Machines which were not her daughter. It was a modern miracle, to know better.

For weeks she waited in a rural Texas hospital for a bed to open in a city hospital, where there were lupus doctors. Lupus that has been my life with her. Her diagnosis at my birth. While we waited and waited, she lost seventy pounds, waiting, and began to resemble the child that was acting through her.

The Lord says, unless you become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven. I try to remember this. That madness could be a pattern's conclusion, a natural end. It had came for her peacefully. Overnight, as though she never woke up.

The End of the World

Seven years ago, my mother had a series of dreams that it was the end of the world. Babies were loose in the streets, crying out, terribly. She was going through the streets and picking them up, tucking the little bread loaves under her arms and bringing them home and caring about them. Why when I came home to visit one weekend, my old bedroom was filled with packaged diapers. In the house my parents lived in alone.

In another, she saw the sky go dark at midday, blacken. With this, she knew to raise her arms, for the sky to breathe her in, but he didn't, my young brother. She opened the door and screamed for him, but he didn't hear her, because no sound was coming from her mouth.

Because of her dreams, and how they weren't dissolving upon waking, but solidifying, like stones conveying an arch, she decided it was true, the world was coming to an end. Her dreams confirmed it. Each one a different body forming a community that agreed with her. Even my father agreed. It was not this way with all of her dreams. Her dreams of the end of

the world suited him. He liked to think of himself as someone who could weather anything, with the right equipment and skills. In the cabinets of his office were shelves of guns, knives, ropes, batteries, an old fashioned sword.

I remember coming home that weekend, I was twenty or so, to the makings of a large bow and arrow, around six-feet tall. It was the size of my father, standing upright. He was making the bow and arrow out of wood and other materials, covering the linoleum floor of the kitchen in shavings, like a workshop. When I asked him why, he said, For silent kill.

At dinner, we had squirrel from the backyard, frogs from the pool. All the game he could find in the suburban neighborhood where they lived, and I grew up. My father unwrapped the skin of the squirrel and, with the limbs of the frogs, prepared it all into fried bits. It was good as any fried thing, if you could forget what you were eating. We might have gone to the grocery, or out, if I'd asked, but some part of me was still wanting to be their child, to go along with all of this. We borrowed non-perishables from the pantry like a bank. Ate on paper plates.

My parents had found some land, deep in the country, to look out from in the end. Blank land where no one lived, population one hundred. The blueprint for their house had bedrooms for us all. My brother and I, their parents and siblings. If we found anyone else, they'd take them.

If she could, my mother would take everyone in. She would have all of her students at the elementary brought inside. Her students who came to school tired and smelling terribly,

who might be shuffled from house to house, or to no house at all. Her students who adored her and brought her gifts, even though they had nothing, they brought her dried glitter glue. The little loves of her life, she called them. She also called her dogs this. Birdie and Cooper, the loves of her life.

The land they found was piney, wild. My parents would drive out to it for days at a time and clear it with borrowed machines. They had a few neighbors who I would know years later. Andy, the war veteran. With stories where limbs would be, where whole bodies would be. He limped all day through his land, pulling up weeds to do without pesticides. His implicit cigarette fixed in the side of his mouth like a snorkel.

My parents would drive out to their land to keep an eye on it, but five hours away my mother was still an elementary school teacher, my father a computer programmer. Their dreams were little match for their lives.

They had a date and time that the world would end. How they knew this, I'm not sure. They set a timer. When it went off, I would be across the state in Alpine, where I lived and went to university, and in one semester would have a degree in literature. I didn't want the world to end when I was just beginning. It wasn't time, for me.

Each time we said goodbye it was the last. There was no reason for my parents to believe we would see each other again. The scenes were heartfelt, wrong. Imbued with a nostalgia for the dead. For days we would speak of our lives in the past tense. It was only

when driving away I would realize I was still breathing, that I must have been the whole time.

A Sign

On a day after I'd come home from my parents', I wanted to walk to school. My boyfriend Joshua and I lived a few miles from campus, in a one-bedroom we could afford because its floors were diagonal. Wavy, even. It had to have been the first house someone built. A few years later, an investor would pay the landlord to have it erased from the map. In its place is a house that looks like the container a house would come in. The people who live there don't know the difference, it is that erased.

Usually I would take the bus to school, it was free. I walked to the end of the road and there it was. Magic. I got on and went. The seat I liked best was near the back, where I could see it all. I didn't mind talking with someone, but it didn't happen often. When it did, it wasn't usually what I'd hoped for. No one talked about books on the bus. But sure, I'd met people on the bus, I'd gotten off the bus with them and gone out for a coffee. I wanted to be that kind of person, that open. This was how I troubled myself, and others.

It was nice outside that day, what I told Joshua, but the truth is I wanted to walk out of myself, of my visit home. If there was anything to my mother's dreams, how they were taking over her life, and gathering anyone willing into their arms, I hoped for a way of knowing. A way in, or out. I was considering this when, from an abandoned lot where there used to be a restaurant, a man turned up beside me. We were walking in the same direction on the sidewalk, at the same clip, and I don't remember how it started, but we got to talking. It seemed natural, or fated, like we'd ended up next to each other on a plane.

We walked that way for a while, not long. There was something he wanted me to see. I had a ways to go to get to campus, but he insisted, I had to see this black antique dresser of his. I think you will love it, he said.

From the street, he led me behind a house, into the backyard. From there we walked further into the backyard, toward an old wooden shed. I looked back. It was then that I wondered if there would be a dresser at all.

Around the shed, on the other side, was a large wooden area, dense with trees, where he would hide me afterward.

Here she is, he said. I was so lost in my death that I didn't see it. The dresser. It was even black, and antique. Only sixty dollars, he said, beatific. I didn't have any money with me, I was sorry. I told him this, and thank you, and I started to leave.

We walked back through the yard, toward the street, and when it felt like I could be gone as simply as I came, he asked if I wouldn't sit with him for a moment.

I don't know why, but I did. It didn't feel like a decision. I had a kind of belief in interruptions, that there was more to them. I wanted to leave, but I wanted to know why I was there, more.

We sat in chairs opposite each other, an ashen fire pit between us. I could see him fully then, head on, in those chairs. How larger than life he was in that lawn chair, from which he extended in all directions, like a long-legged spider, while my feet didn't touch the ground, but dangled, childlike.

His t-shirt was clean, white. Everything about him was kept except for his hands, with dirt so deep in the cracks it would take surgery. Dirt under his nails, like they'd just come up from the earth.

He pulled out a pipe, and we talked for a while. He wanted to sing for me. He did. I think it was an Elvis song. He sang through great gaps and decay, the mad look of a jack-o-lantern. He asked me if I believed in God. Did I? I said yes. But when I said it, it felt like I was saying something else. By yes, I meant, I am weak and trusting, I want to leave, but I am in this chair, this chair made of plastic.

I'd like to pray over you, he said.

I watched as he rose from his chair, mountain that he was, and walked over to me, where he bent down to his knees. Even on his knees, he was a mighty hill. There, he faced me, a bit to my left, and took the arm on my right side into his, tucking his pipe hand into my abdomen. He rested his chin on my shoulder, and began to pray.

His words were close enough to enter, fill me. His breath hot against my neck, his hand firm on my arm, I thought only of the pipe against my stomach– how it would penetrate, how this would end. How easily I would be led to unto death, for an antique dresser.

When he was finished, he released me. He stood back up and began humming again, or whistling, whichever it was, that nothing song. Nothing had just occurred. No death, no prayer, no God.

I tried to match his lightness, to go along with him. I thought that it had to be the way, to let him think this was all nice, what a nice day we're having, I'd better just be off now. And it seemed to be working, we both stood up to leave, when he said, can I pray over you again?

His question cut through my act. Strange, I felt that he knew this, and he was testing me. That he wanted to boil me down, soften me, as though the prayer had always been to get to something else. I couldn't do it again, he knew this. And yet it was my only way out. I said alright, but after this I had to leave.

And then I just lost it. The thought of staying or leaving, the thought of being anywhere at all. It felt my mind had left me there, or that it was holding my body in front of itself, to hide behind. I was only body, wet and flowing, salt and blood. My solid-covering was dissolving, I was becoming everything, nothing, it was all the same, when he snapped in my face. His fingers. He snapped his fingers in my face.

Stop it, he said. He snapped again. Stop crying.

I've been waiting for the moment when He told me I could tell you that. You asked for this. So stop crying.

Asked for this? I thought, stunned, sober. And then I remembered, I had been praying as I was walking, for a sign, for any reason to believe my parents. If it was the end, I needed to hear it from someone else. It was true. I had asked for this.

Then he said, he isn't waiting for you. He didn't say Joshua, but that's who he meant. I thought about this as everything was loosening in, around me. What he was saying. *He isn't waiting for you*, meaning, there is only now. His snap, the end or beginning of a hypnosis, I didn't know. His snap was *now.* Now was all there was. He quoted scripture for several long minutes, and then he pulled me into him, and prayed over me again.

I remember his teeth at my neck, how his words moved me, physically. How I'd never been touched like that before. When he was finally done, my hair was out of its clip, my shirt

hung from my shoulder. He asked me if I'd like to contacted again. I moved my head, slowly, to say no.

Then be off unto the sea, he said, gesturing to the street, where cars passed as easily as before, and I walked away. I walked to my house which was just two blocks from where we were and fell in the doorway of our house, where Joshua was waiting for me.

. . .

In the days, weeks, after, Joshua was my mind. He thought for me. He would drive me to school, and home, afterwards, and put meals down before me and wait for me to fall asleep before turning in himself. In truth his mind had always been enough for the two of us. Joshua, he was brilliant. Tall and drawn out, slow with me. I didn't have to explain myself to him. There was nothing to say.

I waded through those different days almost sanguine, indifferent, by the light of my mother's shadow where anything was possible. A flood was coming, she said. It would tear the U.S. on its fault lines, leaving motherless babies in the streets.

In our phone calls, I listened, wept with her, let her in.

It felt I'd taken on an additional sense, an attunement with my mother, her dreams, and it had diminished my others. My sense of sight, sound, self. It felt that I had never left the parameters of her womb, that it had only widened, to hold me in.

I saw her dreams belying everything around me. How I might be going through the line at the grocery and imagining everyone underwater, in no time at all. Or seeing in the look of the cashier my age, an innocence I had aged out of. I was so old, older than everyone else. I kept what I knew to myself, and it changed the way I looked, the way I was. It was cast on my face, the end of the world. In me, before everyone else.

I let Joshua in. If he said anything to anyone else, it would be unlike him. He was a quiet person. And what would he say, anyway? From even my mouth, the words don't cohere. I know this. I can read the page as though I haven't written it. Sometimes I imagine that I haven't, that it would be better to not look at the page at all, and set my gaze above it when I'm writing. Keep myself out of it altogether. When I write it can feel that each word is remembering the next. That I am only clearing a path for them, giving them space.

. . .

One evening when Joshua picked me up from school, he asked me what I'd like to do, where we should go. I thought about it for a while. It took me a long time to think of these things, as though he'd cast a line and we were both waiting for something to swim by. I like this kind of beer, I said, for him. It was something we could do together. The beer was a kind you couldn't find at any bar around there, only bottled, at the store. So he drove us to the market, and we talked about the man, and how he had changed everything. What had happened that day. It was all we talked about anymore. We talked and rode around town. We drove all the way to the market, and when we got there it was too crowded, so we drove to the corner store near our house instead. We parked in the lot and, for some reason, neither of us got out the car. Everything could wait. There was no time.

I remember feeling content, then. How I could smile easily, love him, easily. It was all easy now. He was my mind, and also his own, for me. We were of one mind, in a way. I could only vaguely remember what it was like before, when we didn't have a common cause.

After a while, maybe ten minutes, I stepped out of the car. And when I arrived at the front of the store, the door opened for me from the inside.

It was the man who'd prayed over me. The way he was dressed, everything about him was the same.

Hi, we said to each other, as I walked in the store and he walked out.

I didn't know what was expected of me. From the man or from God. I wandered into an aisle where I couldn't be seen, and narrowed in on labels, on things I wasn't interested in, peanut butter, canned soup, crackers. I read the numbers, the ingredients, anything that would take time. I didn't know how long it would take. If when I walked out, he would be there, waiting.

When I finally made it out of the store, I could breathe. He wasn't there. Joshua was standing outside of the car, facing me.

Was that him? he said.

How did you know?

When I went into the store, the man had lingered at the newspaper stand and Joshua knew, somehow, he should get out of the car. So the two of them stood side by side in front of the store. Joshua on the sidewalk, leaned against the hood, and the man on the sidewalk, in front of the newspaper stand.

It was strange, Joshua said. How the man would bend over and peer at the newspaper stand as though reading it, though it was obvious he wasn't. It was more like someone who was pretending to read the newspaper. Or pretending to be a person. Read the paper, something a person would do.

He ate an entire row of powdered donuts while they stood there. At some point he turned to Joshua and said, how are things. Fine, Joshua said. Good, the man said, and

finished a bottle of chocolate milk in a single gulp before wandering away, with nothing in hand, to nowhere. The only thing in that direction was a dumpster and a half-up fence.

What do you think it was all about? I asked.

I don't know, Joshua said. It felt like he was checking on us. Seeing how we were.

The Bus

On a morning that Joshua left me at the corner of campus, as I walked across the lawn, a friend recognized me and called out from where she was in the distance.

Hey, asshole! she said. It was our humor, then. It'd been months since I'd seen her. As I lowered my waving hand, a man came up to me, his thick arms darkened with ink. You're not an asshole, he said.

He asked me if I had a minute. In truth I was already late, I knew this. I knew my advisor would be waiting for me in his office, to discuss my thesis. And yet this didn't mean, to me, that I was without time. Time isn't something I have or don't have, not in the moment. So I followed him. I walked with him a short distance, where a maroon bus was parked on the edge of campus, and I got on with him.

The man set me in a booth, where there was a small table in front of me and another seat facing. From where I was sitting, I looked up at him for a nod, or something, but his gaze

was already beyond me. It seemed we'd reached the limit of our relationship, and he was off to look for other people who weren't assholes.

I looked around. The bus was organized into sitting and sleeping places, like a home. There must have been a kitchen, somewhere, because pleasant women were descending the aisle with lemonade and baked cookies. The passengers were dressed in long jean skirts, cargo shorts and plaid button-downs. Some of the men spoke seriously into flip phones. They all had ponytails, the men. Their hair was pulled back.

A man came and sat in the booth with me as though he was late for our meeting. He wanted to know why I was there. I didn't know what to say. I knew that I wasn't where I was going, and that I'd been redirected by some impressive arms, but why was I there was my question for him. The real truth is, I could have been anywhere at all.

He told me how he'd gotten to be on the bus himself, what to him felt like a natural conclusion to disillusionment with modern living, the church. Just look, he said, pointing out the window of the booth we were in. What are they all doing?

We stared out together, the aquarium that was now the outside world.

From where we were sitting, it did look strange. The myriad directions people seemed to be heading, as though their only destination was away from the person nearest them. How little proximity had to do with living together was clear from a window's distance. We looked back at each other, my seat mate and I, and smiled. It was kind of funny.

The people on the bus tried to live differently, he said. They didn't live on the bus. They were part of communities around the country, the world, traveling to find others where they were, and not leave anyone behind. They lived on farms, and ate well. They cared for one another, thanked God. We're real people, he said, with worries like anyone else.

The truth is I liked him. He had a rare patience, a story before all of this, a life of curiosity that led him there. And so by the time he asked about my history, I felt I could tell him how it had been for my parents, for me, the end of the world, how our phone calls were each time the last, how terrible it was to live from death to death, and still be so sure.

As I said these things, others gathered around. An older couple with haggard, rocky voices, motorcycle people before finding this bus late in their lives. The woman had grown up religious. She had grim, religious parents. I think she saw something of herself in me. I wasn't ready to go that far. But it was nice, all of it was nice, these people who had time, when no one else seemed to, as though they'd been storing it up, and it was their wealth. They were surrounded by time. Their patience had an elegance, a splendor.

How long had I been there? I thought suddenly of my advisor, of how long he would have been waiting for me. He was an old man, seventy-something. A man who didn't have time.

I should probably be going, I said.

You should?

I considered what he was asking. For me to end it there. He must have known that were I to step off the bus, I wouldn't come back on. And I did, in that moment, feel as sure as he did, of something. That it was good to have gotten on the bus, even if I was to get off. I thought of my advisor, of Joshua. I said, yes, I think I should.

When my advisor limped into his office, he walked a little sideways, it took him a long time to get down a hall, he took one look at the pamphlet in my hands and shook his head. You can't listen to these people, he said. Then he opened an orange and set the bigger half down for me. For you, he said.

When we were working, he would halve his fruit with me. He would say, For you, setting down my half and, For me, setting down his own. He shared with me my first fresh fig. God's gift to earth! he said, his Greek accent almost cartoonish, his mustache dark, wily. I'll never forget the way he ate a pomegranate, mouth to it, like a vacuum.

For him, I would put the pamphlet away. I would get to work, and graduate.

When Joshua and I were in bed, I told him about having gotten on and off the bus that day. I wasn't sure I would tell him until I did. What would he think of me? Was I incorrigible, careless? Did I love him at all? And it shouldn't have surprised me, but I had to wonder who he was, to hear what I was saying, after I'd been such a mystery for weeks, with curiosity. He

thought it was interesting. He listened to me entirely, without suspicion or fear. Joshua, the skeptic. He believed me without believing in anything.

I thought about the bus for days, carrying the pamphlet around for some idea as to why I was carrying it around. As though I was unsure if I had really gotten off, or on, and needed some kind of proof. Then one day an email arrived. Ada, it said. We've been thinking of you. We hope you'll come for a visit soon.

There were other things, but this is what I remember. We've been thinking of you. It gave me such feeling, it filled me with pink gladness. I let the message sink in over a few days, and then I sat down to write him back.

I've been thinking of you, too, I said. I would graduate soon, and attend a writing residency in Missouri. One of their communities was near there. What if I stopped by for a visit along the way?

I didn't send it right away. I thought about what pressing send would mean, what it would set in motion. I wanted to be sure that if I said it, it was true. I would visit them. And would I stay? I hit send before answering myself. And I got a reply.

Return to sender.

My message was in response to his. And yet, it was returned to me. The email I was writing to, responding to, did not exist.

I stared at the messages we'd sent. I read them again. What he'd said to me, what I'd said back. I must have sat there for minutes, however long it takes for a mind to be made. So that when I closed the browser, I closed the thought with it, for good. I took it, in the end, as a sign.

The Continuation

The world didn't end. Not on that day or time. And though I waited to hear from them, the call never came. Our lives went back into place, as though congealing after having melted, and at some point, the diapers just went away. To where, I don't know. No one's bottom.

I can imagine my parents waking the morning after the world was to end, to find the dishes from their last meal still in the sink, and all they'd looked back on fondly, in light of the end, cast into the shadow of living. To find the months of devotion to these last moments, that weren't the last at all, not even a little the last, ending in continuation, as though they weren't granted parole. And I have to wonder how many times this has happened, the world not ending, not ending again.

Physical Therapy

Of course I would drop everything to walk the dog with her, two laps, around the pool. It was what I was there for. I was sitting on the couch patched with duct tape where it had been chewed through, wrapping dishes in newsprint. Four years after the world didn't end, they were moving toward that promised land in the country. It was as good a place as any to quiet down, retire. They would rent while they waited for the house to be built. They still had the blueprint from before. Birdie, their yellow dog, waited as she would by the back door with her three good legs and the one she carried up close, like a chicken wing.

Is it time for physical therapy? my mother asked, handing me a pair of slippers, and we took her out back.

The pool hadn't been a pool for years. It was instead a large hole in the yard, with about four feet of rain turned green and semi-solid at the bottom. Something memorable to fall into. We would clean it with industrial vacuums and high-pressure hoses and refill it, again, but it always came back to this: a track for Birdie to walk around, and a source of

tadpoles for my mother's classroom at the elementary school. She put them in Ziploc bags with some water and sent them home. There was no shortage of tadpoles in our old swimming pool.

The slippers were for the stickers in the overgrown yard. They were at least two sizes too big and suffered at every seam, as though they were shoes fashioned out of dog toys. She knew that I would have just come out barefoot, dealt with each sticker individually, after the fact.

Birdie's hind legs had thinned and her chest enlarged from months of dragging herself across the carpet like a seal. She would pull herself a mile to see you. Wherever you were in the distance, when she saw you, she would start pulling. Birdie was pure love.

After the second lap, we'd try to get her to do a third. She'd just begun to put her back leg down after her surgery. She was recovering so well, was almost her old self, when she ripped through the muscle again. It had to have been Cooper, their other dog, somehow unaware of himself, large as he is. The size of me thinking he is a lap dog. He would hump Birdie while she was just laying there with her little broken leg.

The surgery was two thousand dollars, without physical therapy. And since it was successful, to do the surgery again would be to pay for it again. This was how my mother came to walking Birdie a few times a day around our strange swimming pool.

When we were done, and Birdie was laying in the sun, collecting bleached, dying grass in her golden coat, my mother asked if I wanted to sit there a little longer.

"And look at the swamp?" I said.

"We can turn the chairs around," she said, lifting a rusty lawn chair from where it was laying on its side, with three others, as a makeshift barricade to the stairs that led into the pool.

"These are for Birdie," she said. "So she doesn't try to go in for the tadpoles. Catching tadpoles used to be her way of life."

I remember sitting in those chairs when they were new, a completely different look without the rust. I was so young then myself. We might have both seen each other that way, in remembrance, memory feeling closer to the truth.

We would sit in those chairs around a glass table in the backyard, where my mother and I were sitting then, though that table was no longer there. Our scene was desolate, dried-up. Gone and away were the towels that wrapped around our fishy bodies, our mouths crooked with teeth, the paper plates piled with hot dogs and potato chips, Michael Jackson or something on the stereo. The hot Texas sun burning through however many layers of our sunscreen, we couldn't care, those happy, pig pink summers. My father at the grill, if he wasn't giving us the cannonball of our dreams. His splash was a natural disaster. My aunt sat

next to my mother at the edge of the pool, with just their legs in the water, and cousins were everywhere you looked. All of this, back when the pool was blue.

Of course I wanted to stay there a little longer. It was why I was there.

I pulled a chair off its side and sat beside her facing away from the pool, toward the back of the house. Chickens wandered in and out of a bookcase holding tools and other old things, I don't think it ever held books, and she started talking about my cousin, who'd just had a baby. My cousin named her baby what my twin's name almost was. Rebekah was her name, not the name of the twin I don't have. I had a fibrous material, only something a little troubling for my mother to find in the toilet water.

She will always be that age, negative something. Nothing. While I grew out of that material, and became as old as I am. Older than her when I was born. I think of her in the feminine. She will always be what I think of her. A flowery clod, just solid enough to pull out of the toilet water, just fluid enough to flush away.

It's different to live, for death to begin in some places before others. How my mother could feel it swimming inside her. Without seeing a doctor, she could say, I'm internally bleeding again. Her language has never been figurative. She is literal or nothing, living proof.

I packed boxes with my mother for days in a row. I wanted to help as much as I could in the little time I was there. I was lying in bed one night when my father came to the door of my room.

I had only known my father to leave his office for dinner, and to return to it afterward as though someone had been waiting for him. My room was across the house. If he migrated to the living room, it was after we had all gone to bed. Our house of invisible fences. To have words for me, in or out of my room, was new. It is still new.

Your mother should really be taking it easy, he said.

I don't know what I said in return. I only see him standing there in the doorway, about to cross the line.

She's internally bleeding again, he said. He told me then, that she'd been bleeding the whole time.

All night I was awake. My eyes wouldn't close but I didn't want to see anything. The lights were off when she came into the bed hours later. When I was there she wanted to sleep with me. I had to bury myself in the covers so she wouldn't hear. Sensing something, she asked me if I wanted an allergy pill. Good, I thought. This is what I wanted, for her to think that's all it was.

All night I pretended to sleep. That I wasn't filled with ruinous love, love that could materialize and do something, if there was ever a way, it would be from that eye, that center of the storm I'd become. I could have wiped out entire villages. I could've ended the world. And yet I turned on my side and hid myself from her. Salted the bed. Became less, with all that I had.

"I'm sorry, Birdie," she said in the morning, looking into her empty cereal bowl. "That was rude of me to have eaten it all."

I watched as she poured another full bowl of cereal and milk and set it down on the floor.

"Now y'all share," she said to the two dogs. "They'll eat anything," she said to me, "besides things like fruit and some vegetables. Everything else they'll eat."

When the dogs finished eating their cereal, it was all over in a matter of seconds, she picked up their empty bowl and looked at me with a little smile, self-aware for a moment.

"I have no more children. What else can I do?"

A Good Hiding Place

In the malaise of August heat I arrived in New York with almost nothing. It was easy to let myself go. I didn't hold onto anything. In a new place, I like to not know who I am either. Let something emerge, like smoke from a fire put out. Martin had already made his way from Texas. He'd followed some French painters who painted in a particular style that attracted the ultra wealthy in Manhattan. Martin's sister was a landlord. She had an empty room for us in Brooklyn.

It was the end of a long summer that kept going. My parents should have been across Texas, but they were where I left them, in my childhood home. My mother would have preferred it burn down by then, it was only in the way. If she could only get around it, or through it, somehow, a classroom of elementary students was on the other side waiting for her.

Their house that was meant to be sold wasn't on the market. The renovations weren't through. My brother, the nurse, paid my father a living wage to work on the house as his

full-time job and it was the same. With money, with time, it was the same. It was like my father had told me once, about medication. It helps you stay focused, he said, but only on what you're focused on.

For thirty years, my mother had taught it all: deaf education, special needs, preschool and first and second grade, fourth and fifth. She needed to be in their new town in July, but it was August, and there was no reason to believe in miracles anymore. Still, she continued to hope, to pray, this is how she wanted it to happen, divinely. She didn't want my or anyone's help. She wanted a miracle.

Over the phone, I described New York for her. Our apartment was just around the corner from the pier, where the whole city stood still for the camera. At night it was like looking at the inside of a computer, the motherboard, though I knew she would only be imagining the films we had watched together when I was a child, the very few that we watched over and over again. City scenes that weren't even New York. *While You Were Sleeping, When Harry Met Sally*. I was carrying those long-held dreams out.

The things I told her weren't untrue, but I left out the more familiar parts. The high, taller than me, piles of trash, the everywhere-piles that grub worms and flies found useful for their orgies; the strip malls that were once historic districts with the sorriest comedy shows, the comedians finding it funny to hump things, bar stools, anything at all;

the amount of money we were spending to breathe the air there, which was itself in a state of decay.

The problem with New York is that its nature is the same as the city. The forests are just as congested, claustrophobic. The feeling is the same. It isn't the cracked earth I was drawn from, the open air of my childhood, Redwater, Texas, where drought was a time machine. Dinosaur Valley, we called it, when the river wasn't wet, and had dried up in the summer like an old scroll the dinosaurs left behind. It was like walking on the walls of the Chauvet Cave. It was like walking on the moon. Their imprints big enough to sit inside.

I wouldn't pray for rain. I wanted the same thing as any child. For helicopters to come and see what I'd found, and carry me away. New tracks were always being found and named after the person who happened upon them. Maria's tracks, found just behind the Dairy Queen.

The internet was one town over, but our lives were in Redwater. When we were older and had outgrown the hourlong commute between home and life, we rented a little carriage house in the backyard of someone's home. It was the only place near our school that we could afford, and even then it was beyond us. Our grandmother paid for half. She paid for half of the two-room house which was altogether four-hundred square feet. It was one room on bottom and one room on top, connected by a narrow spiral staircase. Still, you could tell it was a house. It was made of stone.

Our father stayed behind. He worked from home before it was common. He had a computer, the internet, before it was common. He had a palm pilot in his breast pocket, a beeper on his belt. On the legal pads covering his office desk were plans for houses built underground, or out of grain silos. He seriously wanted a helicopter. He had a jet ski, a motorcycle, a vintage car without wheels in the garage.

In the carriage house where we lived without him for two years, there was one bed, in the room upstairs. It was a bunk bed. My younger brother and my mother slept together on the bottom bed, and I slept on top.

I was so near to the ceiling that on nights when it would storm, those storms that still only fall on Texas, when the whole house swayed like tall grass, I knew I would be the first to go. The ceiling would cave on me, and it would give the others time to make it out.

It was easy to be religious. Easy to see the Biblical in the everyday in rural Texas. I accepted death. I started writing wills at a very young age. I kept it up until college. Even in college, I wrote a few wills.

My mother, still in Redwater, past the point, told me a bit about everyone I knew and didn't know. She went on and on, as though her voice was the engine of the phone, depending on her to. Names I didn't remember from my hometown dying in car crashes, dying of cancer, rotting in jail, marrying in Scotland, opening businesses, birthing children into bows, feathers, cursive.

I asked her how the move was going.

Still, she had little help. She loaded boxes until she fell asleep. The neighbors didn't ask, the handymen didn't return their calls.

Where's dad? I asked.

His office, she said, in the way you you might say someone is missing, or in jail, or dead. As though I wasn't really asking.

I told her she could get in her car anytime and drive away from it all, to me, but we both knew she would prefer to wait it out. The world would end soon enough.

"I have an interesting story, if you're interested," she said as we were about to get off the phone, and before she said it, I already knew what she had an interesting story about. At this point, it was a tone of voice.

She began with some Jewish history she'd become reacquainted with. How Israel would, in the end, become its own nation, and God would call the Jews back to Israel, and there would be the construction of a third temple. The plans were already in motion. The only thing missing was an unblemished red heifer.

Would I believe that not one, but four red heifers were en route to Israel, as we spoke? Did I want to guess from where?

What could I do, she was delighted as Christmas.

Where, I asked.

From Redwater. She even knew the farmer who raised them. His daughter had been in her class at the elementary school.

Isn't that *interesting*? she asked me. And I had to admit, she had a way of making the everyday feel foretold, and filled with meaning, suspense, punch lines. She was a good storyteller. That our small town in Texas would be drawn to Jerusalem, like a constellation previously unmapped, that only my mother had eyes to see, her near-blindness the quality of children, of angels, would come as no surprise, really. Everything is so unbelievable that even this is possible.

. . .

Months into New York, nothing had a place. Everything lived in assemblages across the floor, without any furniture to give it a framing device. We walked around the apartment to go through it. I walked around, at least. Martin walked on top of it all. Not in a domineering way, but surreally, as though there was nothing there. No his-sized shoe marks on everything.

It was our first time alone, together. In Texas we had lived with his son for a year until he graduated high school. His son was closer in age to me than I was to Martin, though

it only sounds important when I write it that way. Martin had him when he was still a child himself. He would strap the boy to the front of his bicycle and they would ride that way everywhere, the look of an older brother and his baby brother. He raised his child alone. In this way, he was a mother too.

One morning he called me into the bathroom. There was something I needed to see. I really hoped not. I sat up as a gesture, my limit, let the air conditioning unit run over me.

You're gonna die, he said.

Fine. I undid the covers, walked around the room to where he was standing by the toilet bowl, and when he lifted the screen of the window, he wasn't kidding. Down in the alley two kittens were nestled around their mother in a blurry palette of brown, grey and black. Their eyes the bright green of jungle frogs.

The alley was more of a crack in a giant building than a path between two. From where we were standing, we could lean out of the window and touch the opposing cement wall. It was a good hiding place, I thought. We never so much as heard a meow from them. I'm not even sure how Martin found them out. But every so often we'd open the screen and look down on them, just emerging from a wooden board in the debris, or curled like ribbons around their mother, and they'd look up at us. Them at us, us at them. An understanding.

Our apartment was in the middle of a three-story building Martin's sister managed. Above us was a Ukrainian woman and her child, and below us was the father, her ex-husband.

When they split, she moved up and we moved into the space between them. Our other neighbor was Joseph, a Polish immigrant who had lived in the same building next door since he was a boy, when Brooklyn might as well have gone by a different name. Before it had frozen yogurt and a bakery spelled *Bakeri*.

We met Joseph one night on the way to the train. He was just standing there, on the sidewalk in front of his building, where a black cat meandered behind him. And since it was obvious what would happen next, his thumbs content in the dimness of his pockets not to know, I stopped and said that his cat was sweet. I didn't think about it. I had only looked down at my hands, and it was there. The string that started him from behind.

And so he was off. Motherfucker this, motherfucker that. Programmed with only a sample of words, it seemed. If it wasn't a motherfucker, it was a fat prostitute.

"I was black before black was invented," he said. "I'm Polish."

He was sort of white. The empty color of the tooth where I'd had a root canal. His blondish hair had the limp quality of graduation tassels. He was a small man, but strong. You could see all of his muscles. The look of something that you might see scaling a wall. Look up and find on the ceiling.

He had children who were grown now, not that he knew them. If they were to show up, he would kick them to the street "like soccer balls." He said he took very good care of the street cats, but a person meant nothing to him, and every so often would toy with the back of his shirt like there was something tucked something back there to prove it

to us. Everyone in his family was dead. Only he and one other were left of the seven original brothers and their single mother who had immigrated from Poland in the eighties.

We did get away at some point. Not having said a word ourselves after that initial line about his cat. Who was blind and crippled, after all. Was kind of running its head into the wall behind him while he talked.

Sometimes Martin and I talked about Joseph, or like him, motherfucker this, motherfucker that, about which parts, if any, of his stories from that night were true.

Could he have carried his dead mother out of the hospital, hailed a taxi and taken her corpse home, where he bathed and dressed and held visitation for her before burying her in the backyard himself? Could Brooklyn have been that different forty years ago?

We were more careful when leaving the house, not to misstep into the hole he seemed to call out from again. But time went by and other things come to mind and left, in the city everything just ricocheted off everything else, the scene of something one might find under a microscope. There was so much happening, anyway you looked at it, and it seemed nothing that could be done to slow life down.

I could hear the difference in my mother's voice. Once epic, her body big enough for the two of us, she was reduced to a sound through a phone, thinner every time. She was so old, already. Too young to be so old.

One night before I'd fallen asleep, I heard something coming from the alley below. It was late, Martin was already out. I heard someone walking through the leaves and broken boards and whatever else seemed to reproduce down there, binary fission or something, and then Joseph, giving instructions.

"They come over here when they're hungry," he said.

The kittens.

I wanted to walk to the window and look down, and know what I never would, what happened that night. But instead I felt somehow implicated. That if I moved at all, I would give them away.

I listened as the person in the alley became more desperate, as they gave up any attempt at secrecy and lumbered through the alley like a giant. Either the kittens weren't there, or they couldn't find them.

I stared at the window from the bed until the alley quieted again. I thought it could be a good thing, a warning. The mother would know what to do. But I didn't know if she was listening as I was. I didn't know if she was hiding very well, or if she was out, and would later return to her home which was now a trap.

. . .

In the middle of the night, I woke to a creeping warmth in my groin. The first shade of red was almost see-through on the tissue. I looked at it for a moment before I set it in the toilet water. But there was something else, reaching out from the inside. When I pulled on it, it came out intact, covered in blood. A bright, luminous, cherry-colored blood, dripping from a fleshy mass.

It looked like a small coin purse, or a deflated balloon, which I held at the narrow end in front of the bathroom mirror, to see it from all sides. I turned it, slowly, this shriveled and wrinkly piece of me. It looked older than me. Wrinkles I didn't have. A fossil that worked its own way out of the ground and into my hand. I wrapped it in a paper towel and set it in the bathroom drawer. Then I laid a towel down and went back to sleep.

In the morning, there was a new pain in my gut. It hurt badly and felt opened there. Cut open. I had to hold it for it to settle at all. Martin didn't think we should wait. As he drove us to the emergency room, I hoped something was truly wrong. That my fear would be confirmed, and there would be proof of the pain, a reason to believe.

When we arrived, the door opened for us automatically. They knew we were coming. I walked in hunched, my hands on the place where it hurt, and put my name on a list. A nurse took my vitals, and after I gave the woman behind the glass my information, I sat next

to an otherwise ordinary woman who was coughing through a hole in her neck. She held a tissue at the base of her neck to collect what was coming out from there.

I thought my appendix had ruptured. I was with my brother when his did, and I thought I was feeling how he looked. The pain had bled into my legs and chest. I unzipped my pants, and tried to stand that way when it undeniable, when I knew it was the end, and I could no longer hold myself up. I walked with my pants undone toward the woman in the window, in the half-mast posture of someone in a medieval pillory. It was amazing that I didn't bother her, that she was not interested in the drama that I was at all. Even more amazing what a window could do.

I asked her if it was possible to be seen now, it was getting so much worse. She said that they could run a test and see what the machine thought. She was sorry but it was the only way, through their machine.

I stared desperately at the screen as though it was a lie detector exam, hoping I was telling the truth. I didn't know if I was either. I only felt the pain.

I didn't pass. I would have to continue waiting with the others. The coughing woman sneezed through her neck. Martin ran to catch what I was throwing up with his canvas bag. He helped me sit back down and then went to wash his bag in the bathroom sink.

My name was eventually called. Not to see the doctor, but to be weighed. This nurse was worried about me. She'd only seen someone like this once. She didn't tell me for what. She put me in a chair and wheeled me to the bathroom to take a urine sample.

She and Martin lifted me to and from the toilet and wheeled me to a bed after, where three other female nurses came to my side. They could see I was dying, that a part of me was dead. My angels. They looked on me with love.

You're the same priority as stroke patients, they said, happily.

While we waited for results, one of the angels gave me a double dose of morphine. It didn't change anything, so she added some other things to the mix. Eventually I was laying flat on my back, breathing. I could keep my head from lolling over, the nothing in me from coming up.

Martin was there with me the whole time. Later he would tell me how worried he had been, but at the time I didn't see it. I saw his full attention. How he didn't sleep but stayed up talking with me until I was released at six the next morning, telling me stories I'd never heard from his childhood. His knobby fingers wrapped around my arms, my hands. He gave my laughter wings. It flew out of me. That's what I remember.

The doctor came in early in the morning, around three. He said what I might have known, if I had thoughts about the night before, but what I didn't understand. I'd had a miscarriage, he said. It wasn't ectopic like they'd feared.

I had an infection, and a miscarriage. He said it was strange to have happened the way it did, but there was no reason to believe that for us it would happen again. He walked over and gave a hand to Martin's shoulder. Really, it was good news.

It wasn't until I was back in our bed, and I was alone, when Martin had gone on to work later that morning, that I understood what had happened. What we'd lost. A child. It had wanted to come out. I'd pulled on it, like one end of a rope it had let go of.

I remember not wanting to talk with Martin in the days after the hospital. Martin who had a child. He'd been through it already, to the other side. We were never coming from the same place. There was fourteen years of life, a house he built with his hands, a wedding, a divorce, a child, that we had to see through to see each other. It was easier for him than me. He didn't think any of it had to do with us.

In the days after the hospital, I didn't want to see a glimmer of relief reflecting off his sympathy. That's what I thought it was, sympathy for me, not sorrow for the loss, for us. For him, it had changed nothing. We weren't without anything. It was never there. So I carried with me a weight heavier than the loss. The understanding that my pain, and all that it meant for us, was private. The child had been mine, and it was his, but it wasn't ours.

I never did see the glimmer. He seemed broken down. We could try again, he said. But it had only happened. It was there and then it wasn't. There was nothing to say. I knew it

wasn't right to talk about it differently. I kept what I thought to myself, and it changed the way I looked, the way I was. It was as easy as looking in the mirror. The change was there. I could point to each line, tell you who it was that left it as they passed through me.

I called my mother later in the week. I hadn't had the words, before. I still don't know if I do. I missed her the first time, and when she called me back several hours later, she didn't come outright with the fact that they'd been robbed. She asked me how I was doing first. This was how it was with her. She just wanted to hear something from the outside world.

They'd been taking their loads out to the country, one flatbed at a time, when in-between trips when no one was on the property, someone came and took what they'd been keeping in the shed. They even took the stone statue of a naked lady in the front yard. The statue being the distressing part for my mother. That they would take anything.

When we got off the phone, I called my brother and we talked clumsily over one another about what to do to protect her, our mother, who would be living in that rent house alone while my father stayed behind to finish selling our childhood home. We would pay for her to stay in a hotel. Our father had a month to finish selling the house, or we would take care of it ourselves.

I'm older, so I made the call, presenting the man who raised me with the rules from then on out, a tone of authority I hadn't once had to exercise, and one I wasn't aware I had in me until that moment, as though I'd been gestating a mother inside all that time, and it

worked. He didn't even talk back, he even said thank you. For a terrible second, I thought about one day having to wipe his bottom. All of this in a few incredible hours. And what if no one had done anything? My mother has never asked for anything, especially her own protection. Even with the rope between us. All she'd have to do is pull.

. . .

I don't know when the meowing began. But in the days following the night that began in alley and ended in the hospital, when we lifted the screen and looked down, only the mother looked up. She would wander the alley from end to end, or scale the rim of the fences surrounding the courtyard, sounding hopelessly into the air, day and night, her lengthened, drawn out calls, like a siren. Hers was a long song. Bars of rest that led to soft and mournful re-entry, eventual crescendo and denouement, carried out over many days and weeks, or perhaps never ending, as though her life, or life itself, depended on it to circulate the blood, reach every organ.

Sometimes I thought it was me she was calling out to. That she knew I was listening, and would be the one. When Martin wasn't home, I went missing, found myself in her. Even

if he was there, it was all I could do not to stop. Stop everything we were doing and just listen. How long would it go on? How long does a mother grieve?

I fooled myself sometimes, thinking I felt a kick. As though some of it was still in there, growing, making do with less of itself than before. I'd heard of people having just hands or teeth or a little hair in them, causing problems, and it would have to be surgically removed. How would it look, to go back again and ask for imaging. Are you sure that nothing's there?

When I told my mother what had happened, and how it had changed me, how I could think of leaving my longtime relationship, she said she'd been where I was before, when she was engaged for the first time. In all of my years with her, and everything she'd revealed, crudely, as though spilled, I'd never heard of a prior engagement. Of all her loves, she'd never mentioned him.

She was a sophomore in high school. He was five years older. They were engaged for a year. At some point in her senior year, she thought, I'm so young, I can't do this yet. So she ended things there. And many years later, at her wedding to my father, he came to the chapel and set a blown-glass rose on the table inside the door and left. She never knew that it was him. A friend who noticed him told her in passing, decades later.

She saw this man one other time in her life, at a restaurant. He was with his wife and children. She hid herself from him, didn't say hello or goodbye. She was glad to see how well his life had gone, without her.

"He treated me like a princess," she said. "And when you never quite get that again, it's a very empty feeling."

Everyday I waited for Joseph to return what he tore away. For the mother's tears to come out of her solid, as something to be dealt with, and not just leave her more tired and useless than before. I don't know if it ever ended, her wailing which had gone on, without relief, for months. Or if at some point she just no longer could. If Joseph had taken even this from her, as lupus had, from my mother. Lupus that would take anything.

Lupus the diseases she didn't have that Lupus became. Lupus the river running through her, lupusing around her liver, kidneys, intestines, throat. Her mind. Lupus the emergency Caesarean, my way out. Lupus the cat she never wanted, and got for Christmas the year she'd asked for a dog. The dog her sister got, and was holding in the polaroid where my little mother was lifting up her cat, to hide her face from the camera. If the photograph was big enough to hide behind, you wouldn't see her at all.

I don't know if she is still crying. All I know is that we don't hear her. That when we look down, no one looks up.

We saw him occasionally, Joseph. In passing on the street. One day he was yelling into his phone, with his arms as much as his mouth.

"I kicked that motherfucker in the head like it was a soccer ball," he said.

Martin didn't think he was on the phone with anyone.

An Earring

After the call where I was the mother of my father, and the eyes in the back of my head were my mother's eyes, our father managed to finish the house, and sell our old home. My mother was only alone in their new town for a month. They were living in a rental while they waited for their house to be built.

My father worked at a mechanic shop, something he'd never done. This was how it had been for him for three years. He'd worked in grocery, hardware, department stores, after thirty years as a computer programmer. He'd aged out of technology. His long, wiry beard. He smoked out of long wooden pipes, spoke a dead language.

At the car shop, he was the eldest, it was natural to manage the place. He had a child under him, a seventeen-year-old, who worked hard though he talked from shift start to end. His thick drawl was like my father's, and the two of them become a pair, the son my father never had. He has a son, my father. His son is my brother. Though it was not that way when we were young. Only when we were grown did my brother become his son.

My brother, the image of my father. They have a striking physical likeness. The same wide nose, the owl eyes with long, girlish eyelashes. There is no mistaking their relation. And for this, when we were growing up, they wanted nothing to do with each other. Neither wanted to have the features of the other. They wanted to be my mother, to have her likeness, but neither of them did, it was as though my father birthed my brother himself.

In me, they saw her. It's true, I had taken after her. We were freckled, our features more pointed, arrow like, but in many ways I too was the image of my brother. Our owl eyes, our box jaw. At some point when we were growing, he caught up to me, and we were the same height and we were indistinguishable. He wore his hair long, like a girl. And then he passed me. Outgrew our likeness. Still, there was something I had that he didn't have, my femininity, and it wounded him. That I may have had anything of our mother's, even this.

Because he wanted for it, and I didn't have to, he was better at it than I was. He smelled nice and spent a lot of time in the bathroom looking after himself. He was always wetting his hair in the sink and styling it, or having it highlighted to look like a fawn at the hairdresser, they sat together under hooded driers, the two of them, my mother and brother.

Meanwhile my mother begged me to go to the makeup counter and ask for some advice. What could they do about me? She would look only at my eyebrows when we talked, so that I knew to pluck them, or let her have it done professionally. If I would stop for one

second chewing my nails, she would have them painted and polished, but it was a waste, she knew this. I was no good at being her daughter.

It was wasted on me, my brother thought. He and my mother would go out and do girlish things without me, it was less of a pain that way, more natural. The two of them became so natural, over time. It was true, I didn't need proof that I was a girl. It almost seemed too obvious that way. I let him have it, if he wanted it. He could have her, my mother. There was room in her for both of us.

Now my father was a manager, and so my mother was proud, and she wanted us to be proud of him, and would praise him when we were on the phone. She wanted for him the pride we had in her, the praise we sang for her, what she had won from us with all her attention, her patience and love.

In a memory, I am writing him a letter. I want him to come home. The paper is from the printer, something my mother's given me to write him on. I've drawn a little house on it and written that I miss him. Even then I didn't, but I wrote it down, as though writing itself made something true. I'd asked her when we would see him again, and when she said I don't know, I asked if I could write him a letter.

I was around six years old. My brother was still wearing diapers, sneaking into the infant room at daycare to pinch the babies. I was learning to multiply, divide. My mother adored us, she always had a camera in her hand, there are books and books of photographs

that she isn't in. She would set our clothes out for church, for school, send us off with packed lunches or money for the cafeteria. Were it not for this letter I'd written, I may not remember my father ever being gone. But he was, for a year or so, I remember. It was the second time he'd gone off on his own. The first time he'd left, my mother was pregnant with me. When he came back, he had an earring.

Private Room

In the blueprint for the house they would build, they put a closet within my father's closet for his guns. On the page, it said, "private room," so you didn't know. That she went along with this will always be strange to me. How afraid of his guns she was, when they were pointed at her. How she had told her mother that if she were to wind up dead, to know it was him. How she told me this when I was five, six, in the car, and I was to then go in the house, day after day, and court my father, the killer. Now that they were pointed elsewhere, she didn't seem to mind. She felt safer with them around, living in the middle of nowhere.

Tres

When I came home to visit the rental home my parents were living in, my mother told me there was a bat in my room, not to be scared. A live bat, I thought. How little I trusted their instincts by then. But no, it was a baseball bat, propped diagonally in the corner by the door.

"I don't know about you," she said, "but I'd want to go out swinging."

She really hadn't always been this way.

They were living in middle of nowhere. To pay for trash service, they taped a twenty dollar bill to the sack and set it at the end of the driveway. There was a weapon of some kind in every room. In mine there was a bat. In the kitchen, an axe. And we did use that bat before I left, in just the few days that I was there.

My mother was taking a nap when I heard it, the crying out of Tres, their last living chicken, in the yard. I've never lived in the country, but I knew it was wrong, that sound. I went outside and there she was, losing her tail to a gang of little dogs, dogs that would collectively fit in a grocery sack, chasing her and taking bites of her from behind.

Killing her. I went back inside and woke my mom. Grab the bat, she said. I didn't want to follow that thought. But I did as she said. I grabbed the bat and handed it to her and we went outside.

Get, she said, shimmying down the stairs of the back porch. Go on. She beat the bat a few times against the ground. And that was it, all it took to scare away death. Off they went, the little dogs, into the woods or somewhere. And when we found Tres, just a few yards away, she was lying with her head against the earth. From the back, there was only a thick swirl of blood and dirt where her tail would be. She was still breathing. I stood there watching as my mother bent down to lay her palm on Tres' back and pet her, gently. It was all happening very slowly now. Time had left with the dogs. It's just mama, she said. It's just mama.

If my mother happened to be at work and it was my father and I there, if it was him who I'd startled awake and who was with me then, he would have shot Tres to put her out of her misery. But since he wasn't, my mother told me to go inside and find an old towel from the drawer in her bathroom. When I handed it to her, she used the towel to swaddle the chicken, and to hold her body together, everything might well fall out the back end, and pulled her up close into her arms. It's just mama, she said, again and again. I followed behind her as she walked with the bundle back up the stairs of the porch.

Hi kids, she said to the dogs as she passed through the kitchen. Then she sat down in one of the recliner chairs in the den and began to rock Tres, like a baby. She had me fill

the little cup on the lid of the liquid Tylenol bottle with water and hold it up to her beak. I could see all of this happening dimly on the turned-off television in front of us.

After a while, I asked how she was doing. Tres. I can feel her starting to go cold, my mother said. We all knew what would happen next. She wanted Tres' last hours to be peaceful, to not go down with the fear of dogs at her back. When I would look over, the chicken's eyes, rimmed in red, were slow to open and close. They'd close for a while, I'd think she was dead, only to open again, suddenly, attentively. As though at any moment my father might come home.

I watched as the two of them, my mother and Tres, drifted in and out of sleep on the other recliner chair. You're mama's girl, she said, almost unconsciously, like a snore. All of this backlit by the overloaded Christmas tree, illuminated with multicolored bulbs and wrapped with lanyards of popcorn and cranberries that we'd strung together the night before.

The dogs were excited. There was a chicken in the house. A bloody chicken they could smell. They were licking their lips, and kept coming up to me as though to ask if they could. I told them no, no, no, how awfully sexual they were being, how aroused they were. I had to wonder what separated them from the dogs outside, if anything. If the other dogs simply did what they'd been wanting to all this time. That you could live that way, a whole life, with that desire.

After an hour or more, we tried taking Tres back outside. Set her with her towel in the wire fence where her house was kept. She sat there for a long time. Like she wasn't sure what she wanted to do. Live or die. Then, it may have been one, two seconds we were turned away, she was gone. Halfway up the ladder to her house. While our dogs ate at her grounded feathers, the leftovers.

In time, Tres improved. She and the dogs had an invigorated rapport. She ate from their bowls. They seemed happy about this. Everyone happy to be living among the dead. Tres, the last living chicken, having survived the possum attack that took her sisters and a little piece of her head, having survived this recent attack of the small dog gang and, being too old for this, it was a miracle, really, began to lay again. At the clip of her youth. My mother couldn't keep up, and started making plates of eggs for the dogs. She thought it was Tres' way of saying, Thank you, for saving my life. It did seem that way. From the photos she sent me.

They got more chicks, a few dozen. They kept them under warm lamps in the kitchen and waited for them to grow. The babies didn't have names yet, not until they were out of the nest. My mother checked on them every morning before going to school and every evening when she was home. She had names in mind, but didn't want to jinx it. I heard all of this when we were on the phone, when our conversation was over and we were just listening to each other live.

Then one morning, Tres was gone. Dragged out of her house by a predator. Only feathers in her wake. Only struggle. She was pulled up through the roof of her home while she was sleeping. It was what they'd come to expect in the country. Real life, they thought of it.

When she was telling me about Tres on the phone, she was also telling me about the child in her class who would eat his handouts for attention, the little goat, she called him; about the lunch lady whose too-old daughter was having a "miracle baby;" she asked how my work was going, what I was writing, reading, if I was still with what's-his-name. All of this, before telling me that my father had lost his job, again. She put it this way, so that I wouldn't know he had quit his job, that the trouble they were in was elective.

That I had his blood in me came to mind, that I had a part in this. That the world had ended many, many times. Was ending as we spoke.

What they would do is my mother would keep working, well beyond her time to retire. She would work while she waited for a liver transplant, for my father to find work somewhere, doing anything, and while she waited, she would come home with stories and things to laugh about, like bringing home something good from the store.

When I was older, she stopped saying anything truthful about him. When I had any way to do something about it. When I was a child, it was different. She was just talking to herself.

A Light

The blueprint never became a house. There was no private room, after all. After a year of renting, they decided to buy a manufactured house, something that could be wheeled in and over with. It was a large house. Everyone had their own rooms. My mother had George and I decorate ours, as though we still lived there.

It was Christmas, a month before she went into the hospital for her kidneys, her lungs. The morning-of she crawled into bed with me. I had been waiting for her to. She'd been sweeping outside the door for a while.

I thought I heard you breathing, she said through the opening, before coming in the room. She got in the bed and pulled the covers up past her chin so that when I looked over, I was laying next to a chrysalis.

Wishful thinking, I said.

I knew why she was there. She wanted to know why I wept through dinner, how I felt about the stocking that wasn't hanging with the others, and filled with chocolate and

perfume, but resting limp on the chair beside us, like a prop in waiting for its scene, the line: Does it make you sad, to see Martin's stocking?

I thought about how I felt about that stocking. The one I'd sewn by hand the year before. Martin's name was on its neck, cut out from fabric and reinforced with sequins. On its body was a little tree, a camping tent, a patch from his favorite baseball team. He'd never seen it, not in person. In four years, he hadn't spent Christmas with my family. He was always with his son and his parents. My mother had wanted me to see the stocking. It was why it was there.

I still don't know what he means to me, I told her. I said this to the window.

Outside, the ground was both ripped up and overgrown. It looked like weeds that were one day pulled up and then left there, no longer growing, but still in the picture. Trees on the edge of the wood lay flat on the ground or diagonally, against one another. Others stood like trees.

It's a mess, I said.

Life is messy, she said. It's never between right or wrong. Everyone has so much to give. It's just… who makes your soul alight.

It's just what?

Who makes your soul a light.

I turned from the window onto my side, and her eyes were closed. I pretended to sleep, too. She could keep going, she knew nothing, really, there was so much more she could ask. But she had gotten at least what she came here for.

I watched as she stood up from the bed and put the sheets back as they were, tucked in on her side, and walked quietly toward the door to close it slowly behind her, taking her time to leave as carefully as she could, as though she might wake me. And each of her movements might undo the last, cancel her out.

Not Ending, Again

I was so far away from him that I could do it. It could end with a phone call. I said we could talk about it when were both home, in New York. When I arrived with armfuls of gifts for him from my family, it was over. His skin was purple underneath. He lay in bed still as a corpse, he was that limp and lifeless, it was easy to make the comparison. Hot tears bubbled from beneath his mouth and emerged from his eyes, sinking down his new skin, so purple in that moment of death. I felt I was witnessing something I never would again, a glimpse of a future death I wouldn't be there for.

I said the words that came out, however impossible or wrong. How I wanted to go through life with someone, not after them. How I no longer wanted to be the old child with the young man, I didn't like who I was with him, I found no relief in our love. I said what I could, though I knew it wasn't the truth. I didn't have words for the truth. I only felt the truth. Words were no way of communicating. I said many things, grasping for the right combination of words to unlock the chains that connected us.

He didn't know what he was hearing, or what I was saying. None of it made sense to him. It was like I was telling him that he had died. He took my hand and held it against his chest so that I would know, he was still breathing.

For days we woke woke up and wore each other out. He went cold with a fork in his hand at the table. I had to remind him how to use it, for eating, I said, as though he'd never seen one before. He ate so that I didn't feel so bad, sitting next to him not eating.

I had no idea where he went in those moments of rapture. I didn't want to ask, to see the trouble in his heart at the surface, to watch him dissolve again and again and solidify differently, in ways I didn't recognize. I had only ever seen him cry, in the four years we had been together, about his child. Never once about something else. In every broken down scene of our despair, he was not crying with me. I felt alone.

He finished his breakfast in the morning and went to work and came home more tired and unhappy than when he was with me. To see me was relief. He preferred me to stay, to not leave. He wanted me around, for me to give him pain which was better from me than from not-me.

So I stayed. I loved him. I told him again and again. I was sorry, I said. Our love would go on and on. Deeply I knew from the beginning that the end wasn't something to talk about, that the end would never come.

The Ring

When I returned to the hospital to stay with her for a week, my mother had lost all that weight in her legs, and in her face and body. Seventy pounds. Her eyes sunk into dark holes. In four days she hadn't slept. I brushed her hair, and braided it, and sat next to her in the bedside chair. Closer, she said, again and again, until there was no room between us. She reached across the side rail to hold my hand.

It was March. I think she was married to the president at the time. A clever nurse had printed and signed a presidential order so that my mother would take her medicine. The pills were jumping out of her hands, her mouth, she said. She'd throw them in the air, and say, Are you seeing this? They're trying to run away!

She was in a different part of the hospital this time. The south side, second floor. Even the color of light was different. Yellowed, set-in. My father was taking my mother for her walks to the sixth floor, where she had been a patient before. The floor of young specialists, where

her physical therapist and nephrologist were still. I never walked with her up there. It didn't feel right to go back, now that things had changed.

On the south side, second floor, the nurses shuffled down the hall from one room to the next. I never saw their feet leave the ground. If there was an emergency, someone from the sixth floor might arrive sooner. Though I wouldn't know which of them were true. All of the alarms sounded the same.

On the south side, second floor, my mother was no longer a patient. The hospital had done all they could for her. They could help her body but not her mind. When she had laid on the chapel floor, face down as though floating on a body of water, breathless, one of her hands fastened to my father's ankle, in a hypnosis state that couldn't be broken, nothing could distract her from the love of God, my father had called me hoping I could talk her back into her room. No one else would help him. She'd been laying on the floor of the chapel, unmoving, for three hours.

I'm in New York, I said to her on the phone. Martin is with me. We have a chicken in the oven, I'm writing. I wanted to say something, anything, that would remind her that there were places where we were and where we weren't.

You're distracting me, Ada, I need to let you go now, she said, in a voice I didn't recognize. Slower, and at a higher register, as though words were bubbles she was reaching out to pop.

Eventually someone from security helped my father put her in a chair they could wheel her back in. For a week it had been this way. She was dressed like a patient, but was only waiting for a bed to open elsewhere. She wore her shoes in bed, to be ready at any moment.

When I changed her socks, she showed me with a kind of a somber remembrance the stigmata on her feet. There was a spike-sized patch of dead skin in the same place on both of her feet, right where they should be.

I had flown down, again, to be with her. I knew that she was only waiting at this point, and had been for a week. I didn't know what it would be like. I had only been with her on the phone through her psychosis. I hadn't been there, at the hospital. She was happy to see me. To have someone to play with. She used my arms as the ropes of a swing. We rode horses and played air instruments. I listened to her stories. Do you believe me? she sometimes asked. I do, I said. I believe that what you're saying is true, even though it isn't my experience.

I can't do it, my father said to me, at some point when we were alone. I wasn't a good father to you kids, not in that way. I never could play dumb with you guys like that.

In the few days that I was with her, she decided it would be her and I that would go on to the next hospital. We would leave my father behind. The truth that I couldn't tell her, and that I was hoping everyday against, was that I didn't know if I'd be there when she was transferred. The nurses had no way of knowing how long it would take.

"I'll see you in the future," she told my father. "I've always loved you and I always will." Okay? He could go home now.

Before she told him this, I let him know in the hall. I told him I could take care of things at the hospital until I had to leave, and then he could be with her again. I was sure he could use a break. He'd been with her for weeks. By the time I left, she probably wouldn't even remember having said what she did.

I wasn't sure how it would go, but he took it well. He didn't take it seriously. In that moment, I had to think he was right for her. Better with her than I was. He knew how to see through her. He knew she was out of her mind. It was his power over me. I didn't know what to think. In some ways, her madness made sense.

"Should I take this off now?" my mother said when he left, handing me her wedding ring. "I'm going back as a single woman." I didn't know what she meant by 'back,' and was afraid to ask.

"You're leaving dad?"

"I already have, haven't I?"

"I hear flapping," my mother said, when someone outside the door was changing a trash bag. She leaned in to listen closer, fluttering her fingers like a bird. I told her what it was, that it was a trash bag. "We can go with that," she said, knowingly. "I hear angels' wings."

The day before I would have to fly back to New York, we got word that a bed was ready for her in Houston. A helicopter would come and carry her away. There was room for me to go with her. When they wheeled her out of the room on a stretcher, her arms wrapped around St. Bernadette, she really thought it would only be me and her from there on out. She didn't think my father would follow behind in the car. Even when we arrived in Houston, she hadn't forgotten her story. The nurse asked us if her husband was her emergency contact and my mother said, "No, my daughter will be." Then she turned to me and said, "Should we take him off the list?"

Where were in a state of the art neuroscience center. The kind of center people want to give their money to, a place that needs it the least. The doctor in charge of my mother was named Dr. Smart. He hugged the cleaning staff in the halls. It was a good place to be.

I stayed with her for one night, two days. In the middle of the first night, after we'd flown in on a helicopter that afternoon, she said Asleep or Awake. I heard her, but I kept my eyes closed. It had been a week of trying to sleep in a hospital chair and I was tired. I knew that Asleep or Awake meant something different now, that our dictation was long over, and

she only wanted me to go out and ask for impossible things for her. She kept calling me her chihuahua. Be my chihuahua, she said. A little dog who would go out there and bark bark bark.

She wanted me to ask the nurses to let her friends in. She could hear them just outside the door. I didn't want to bother them, so when she said Asleep or Awake I answered Asleep with my silence, pretending to be.

Around 4 a.m. she called a nurse in on the emergency line and demanded that her husband be put on the phone. If I wasn't going to be her chihuahua, someone else would. She called him at 4 a.m. and he answered his phone from my cousin's couch where he was staying, and he drove to the hospital. Since I had slept that night, she wanted nothing to do with me. It didn't matter that I was sorry, or that on our last day together I would only see her through tears. My mother would have put an end to a sniffle. This person would have watched me drown.

She no longer trusted anyone. She decided she was being held hostage. The nurses and doctors were actors. The hospital was a set. She asked for a chair to sit in the hall and watch them. She knew the nurses were keeping her friends from her. She could hear all of her friends just outside the door, or upstairs, having a good time without her.

When it was my time to leave, she was watching television. She didn't say goodbye. For the hour before, she'd been telling my father and I to watch with her. Stop everything we were doing and just watch. It was only for us, this show. It was our lives on the screen. What was on our television was on no one else's in the world. It was scenes from our lives. And we weren't watching it. She shook her head in hopeless despair. We weren't watching our own lives.

I left her there at the hospital. It was late March. On the second night in her third bed, I flew through the sky. Martin bought me a first class ticket. It's the only time I have ever flown that way, when she was in a hospital bed. I tried to form one moon out of two, my drunk eyes. My third glass of wine. Two moons, on a cloudy dark night. I few through the double moon while she laid in there in bed. Her third hospital bed.

My brother never visited her. Not when it was her body, or her mind. He was in nursing school. Mom would want me to be doing what's best for me, he said to me on the phone. That's what I think about when I'm not with her. That she would want me to be doing what I'm doing.

I agreed with him. I didn't care. I only thought of her, of her unhappiness, I would wreck his day when I called, telling him that I had played with her, and wasn't helping her

understand what a fool she'd been. I was only making it worse, he said. It didn't matter to me what he thought, if he wasn't there, if it made her happy, if it gave her a little relief.

In updates from my father, she was walking laps around the whole hospital, looking for me in the days after I left. She thought I was in labor and would miss it. She walked around the hospital looking in every room for the room in which I was giving birth.

My father had to call me and put the phone on speaker and say, Ada, are you in labor?

I should hope not, I said. I'm not pregnant.

She's lying to me, my mother mouthed silently to my father, going back out in the hall to find me.

Toward the end she wanted escape. The hospital security would stop her and bring her back to her room, and if she wasn't put right down with medication, she'd go leave her room again. After more than two months in two hospitals it would be easy to think it was the end, that there would be no getting out.

She passed all of the tests they had for her, and it confirmed her fear that this was all made up. It was a trap. On paper, there was nothing wrong with her. Dr. Smart didn't like to come by her room and see her there, still. In her, his own fragility confirmed. At a certain point, he didn't want to know the question she answered. It didn't help him to be curious, to be wrong.

She was sedated during the day and given Haldol at night, so she would go down. Put me down, she'd say. Drug me. She knew what they were doing, but she thought it was to keep her tired and useless. It was true. She was tired and useless. There was nothing anyone could do for her.

After a month, they let her out the way she came, with a script for a Schizophrenia medication. A disease she didn't have. Lupus that would become anything. I didn't think it was possible. To let someone go like that, without an answer.

. . .

They went home, to east Texas, where my mother drifted uneventfully into retirement after thirty years of depending as much on her students as they did her. The loves of her life. She was home, which my brother thought would be all it took. She had only gone stir-crazy from being in the hospital that long. It would work itself out. She sounds good, he said, when we talked about her on the phone.

My father sent photos of him and her playing board games when the power went out, again, and they were without water and electricity for days. I had no idea what anyone was talking about. I had to see for myself.

This time I drove, and Martin came with me. It took us three days. When we made it to the end of their long country driveway, my father was the one to come outside and greet us. He kissed me on the cheek. My mother hesitated to come out of the house, but made her way slowly. When we hugged she was soft with loose skin, deflated, hanging from herself. We put our things in the house and while Martin talked with my father in the kitchen, my mother and I settled on the couch.

Do you still have my ring? she said.

You think you'll stick with him? I said, teasing. She gave a defeated smile, looked down at her hands.

You know how crazy I was, don't you?

What are ya'll talking about? my father said, from the kitchen.

Girl stuff, she said.

My father wanted to show us their new chickens. My mother would wait for us inside. In every way, she was different. Her lips trembled when she spoke. She walked with her hands up at her chest, like she was dog-paddling through water. I was different too, with her.

I'm the chicken whisperer, my father said to Martin as we followed him to the barn beside the house. In the back corner thirty or so chicks were crowded together, growing. It's just daddy, he said. It's just daddy. He fed them and and closed the doors for the night, to

keep the possums and raccoons out. There was a black panther he'd seen recently, on his game cameras.

We keep another animal out here, he said, leading us away from the house to a large steel container that held his more expensive tools and projects. I realized what he meant as we got closer. He was going to show us a nest of dead rats that he'd told me about before. Rats that had found their way in for warmth in the winter, and that he'd closed the door on, unknowingly. They'd starved to death. Or from eating whatever they could find. Paper, wire, plastic. When he opened it back up, the place stunk terribly. He'd followed the smell to the nest.

When I told him I wasn't going in, he mocked offense. Then he cranked open the door to reveal a giant machine taking up half the storage space. It looked like a very large golf cart, or something used in war.

It was called a mule. The animal they kept in there.

How much did that cost? I asked, pretending I didn't know. I had seen the receipt on his computer earlier that day, I just hadn't known what it was for. I think he was just looking at it. It was on the screen when I walked into the room. $18,000.

A pretty penny, he said. I turned around to go back inside and they followed behind me. Inside, my father went to the kitchen sink where my mother was and started doing the dishes right away.

I showed them the animal we keep out there, he said to my mother. She didn't know what he was talking about.

The mule, he said.

Oh, she said.

After dinner, Martin went to our bedroom to talk to his son on the phone, my father went to his office, or somewhere else, and she and I moved to her bed. She didn't want to watch television, or listen to music. Everything made her worry. We lay in awkward silence. We didn't know each other. With nothing to do but look at her hands, she remembered.

Do you have my ring? she asked.

I went to my bedroom and got it for her. It had been tucked into a pocket of my backpack for months. When I handed it to her, she put it back where it had been on her left hand. On her right was the ring I had bought for her years ago. Garnet, like the stone ring she had worn as a child and eventually gave to me.

It's always been my choice, you know, she said.

I didn't know what to say. I was a waste.

You don't have to cry, she said.

In the blur of my eyes, I could almost, almost see her.