WITH LOVE FROM ALL OF US: STORIES

by

LINDSAY TIGUE

(Under the Direction of Magdalena Zurawski)

ABSTRACT

With Love from All of Us is a linked collection of fictional stories concerned with connection to place, transitory movements, and women's relationships across time. These stories demonstrate the ways in which characters' lives have taken them to disparate places and concern place-seeking as well as maintaining a historical and present knowledge of inhabited places. These stories chart the way people move through an environment and how the American landscape, in particular, is full of multiple kinds of loss and change.

"Peripheral and Aware: The Flâneuse as Perspective" turns to the underrepresented idea of the flâneuse, connecting this idea to a place-based, environmental perspective. I contend that the flâneuse is a particularly eco-conscious position, more marginalized and aware of the environment than the flâneur. Commenting on the work of authors and critics such as Lauren Elkin, Lisa Robertson, Brenda Coultas, Amy Hempel, Rebecca Solnit, Robert Azzarello, and Walter Benjamin, this introduction asks how, as a woman writer, I can work toward an inclusive perspective that represents a gendered experience of space.

INDEX WORDS: Short Story, Essay, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Environmental Literature,

Flâneur, Flâneuse, American Landscape, Linked Story Collection, Place, Space, Lisa Robertson, Lauren Elkin, Amy Hempel, Rebecca Solnit, Lauret Savoy, Walter Benjamin, Robert Azarrello, Brenda Coultas

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LINDSAY TIGUE

B.A. Michigan State University, 2007

M.F.A. Iowa State University, 2014

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LINDSAY TIGUE

Major Professor: Magdalena Zurawski

Committee: Aruni Kashyap
Reginald McKnight
Channette Romero

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

PERIPHERAL AND AWARE: THE FLÂNEUSE AS PERSPECTIVE

Preface

With Love From All of Us developed gradually as I switched between poetry and fiction over the past several years. During this time, I have come to understand the idea of the flâneuse as a *perspective* that I could apply to my writing and that I could try to embody. My understanding of this perspective continues to develop and, in some ways, is a tool I take with me into future projects rather than solely a representation of the work included in this manuscript, much of which initially came to be in the manner my creative work often does, out of instinct and the reoccurrence of certain fascinations. Every writer has their little obsessions, as it were. I wish to offer this disclaimer because in conceptualizing this introduction I have come to see how I can move forward not only in style and character choice, but in subject and perspective as well. In many ways, I have come to begin to define an aspirational perspective and I strive to make further considerations, especially of inclusivity and environmentality in my future writing.

In addition, I have come to recognize a lateral function of my research or, put another way, a leaning toward horizontal movement between topics. As a writer and researcher, I am often interested in breadth rather than depth, which seems contrary to many typical research

methods. I like to see what happens when two researched subjects situate side-by-side. This, too, reflects my interest in the wanderer, the peripatetic mind. As a creative writer, I am (of course) not against a thoroughly-researched knowledge, but I have to be aware of the ways in which truly deep research can forestall—for me—creative expression. Part of my process has been determining the limits of research; I am constantly considering how much I can and should put into a creative work.

This dissertation's introductory essay represents the aforementioned horizontal searching and it searches for a way to loosely consider a perspective—a way of writing, walking, and being a woman in contemporary American space.

Peripheral and Aware: The Flâneuse as Perspective

> "I tried to recall spaces, but what I remembered was surfaces. Here and there money had tarried. The result seemed emotional. I wanted to document this process."
>
> –Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture*

In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, essayist Rebecca Solnit introduces the problem of women walking in society, history, and literature by saying, "Women's walking is often construed as performance rather than transport, with the implication that women walk not to see—but to be seen—not for their own experience, but for that of a male audience" (234). Solnit discusses in these essays the fact that women, of course, in fact *do* walk for their own experience, but how, despite that, they can often never truly shake the objectifying male gaze. Solnit explores how women move through both urban and more remote environments, joining a tradition in both academic and literary works that have explored how the landscape is represented in American letters as well as the agency of women in literature and history. One of the questions driving my work is how to make eco-conscious connections within the intersection of how women travel through the ever-changing American landscape and how we exercise self-agency in those spaces.

Traditionally, until the advent of ecofeminist discourse in the late twentieth century, the explorations of women's agency and landscape were analyzed separately. In looking at a history of American environmental writing, one notices its close ties to the male perspective, particularly

that of authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. "Nature writing" has long been associated with both "wilderness" as well as the solo retreat within it, most notably revered are the observations and epiphanies of men. Rachel Stein's *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race* (1997) builds on the work of Annette Kolodny and lays out the history and project of ecofeminism as rooted in addressing the historical domination of both women and nature (as well as its intersectional connection to racial oppression). My writing translates ecofeminist concerns to the short story collection, taking advantage of the form's opportunities for multiple settings and voices to provide a polyphonic and time-transcending illustration of women's agency and relationship to place.

In order to consider women's historical relationship to the American landscape, Rachel Stein's explanation of ecofeminism becomes crucial. Stein says,

> The conflation of women and nature within this paradigm often boded poorly for actual American women who, like nature, were generally subordinated to male mastery and denied the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Construed as closer to nature than men, more immersed in the bodily cycles of reproduction and mothering, women, were for the most part, believed to be lacking in the higher mental and spiritual powers through which men asserted themselves over the natural world and raised themselves beyond mere physical existence Believed to be deficient in such characteristics as rationality, political and social leadership, artistic genius, and spiritual authority. . . (10–11)

It is my aim to demonstrate characters whose relationship to landscape is assured yet not "masterful." I want to show women sensitive to their environments, but moving forward, also

women who move through space aware, with caution, and sensitive to the oppression and/or suffering of others. Ecofeminists work to recover the untold traditions governing women's relationships to the natural world and to work on uncovering other historical paradigms for understanding environment. I want to write work, in fact, that considers that aim at the creative outset, seeking to understand my characters' complex relationship to where they come from and where they travel through.

Another important scholarly source for this thinking extends environmental thinking to urban, exurban, and suburban environments, moving beyond the murky parameters of "wilderness" as domain for environmental literature. I draw upon more expansive ideas of American environmental writing that emerged during ongoing reconsiderations of the ecocritical/environmental literature field. As was evident even in Whitman's incorporative embrace of both city and country, the urban sphere presents many opportunities for observation and connection to "nature" or to an environment beyond the self. In their introduction to *The Nature of Cities*, Michael Bennett and David Teague explain that the fields of environmental study were slow to include cities, but that scholarship eventually came to recognize cities' crucial role in understanding any transformation of American landscape (4). Since Bennet and Teague's introduction was published, more ecocritical takes on urban environments have been explored. In terms of urban environments, my writing is interested in the vantage point of moving through them and how this can be understood as an environmental perspective. There is environmental loss within the history of any urban development (among other kinds of loss). How does that reality affect the way current residents, travelers, or, especially, my female protagonists move through it? My fiction sets out to investigate both movement within particular urban environments as well as around the country.

My ideas about urban wandering do stem in part from the long literary tradition of the flâneur, as originally theorized by Walter Benjamin and in response to the work by Charles Baudelaire. Walter Benjamin's major, yet unfinished work, *The Arcades Project* was "an archaeology of the emergence of high capitalist modernism" (Cohen 199). In this sprawling, fragmentary work, Benjamin intended, among his far-reaching aims, to connect the 19th century arcades to temporal shift and modernity's changes; the arcade and its ironwork becoming stand-in for the melding of commodity, outdoor space, and architecture. One of its participants was the flâneur, which has come to stand in for aimless wanderer, often of privilege. Benjamin wrote about Baudelaire in *The Arcades Project,* but he also theorized the poet's flânerie and status as "the first 'modern' poet" in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism* (Ferris 122). Benjamin claims:

> The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd. He is thus in the same situation as the commodity. He is unaware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him; it permeates him blissfully, like a narcotic that can compensate for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity immersed in a surging stream of customers. (Benjamin qtd. in Ferris 126)

Building upon this idea in order to consider the relationship between women and flânerie, Elizabeth Wilson argues that ambivalence (He is "unaware"; "it permeates him blissfully") could be the key to understanding the development of the flaneur in nineteenth-century Europe (79). She explains how simultaneously women were either kept in private, domestic spheres or were labelled as public women, or prostitutes, noting the class differences of men and women who navigated public spaces. Wilson notes that there continues to be a "fraught" relationship between

women and the urban sphere, namely a woman's ability to navigate places on her own free of harassment and assault (79). It is for this reason that I contend that, when the term is applied to women or nonbinary wanderers and observes, ambivalence is not the right word. The protagonists, narrators, and speakers I want to write are aware of their fraught relationship with the public sphere and the urban environment. In other words, the experience of the flâneuse is not wholly "blissful" and is quite often "aware."

An aware or hyperaware perspective can lead to a certain cordoning off from the public that coexists with immersion in the crowd. While my developing conception of the flâneuse includes characters who demonstrate a deep understanding of place drawn from exploration, they also, from certain perspectives keep the surrounding crowd at a distance. I take seriously writer Amy Hempel's defense of what in fiction has been termed "detachment." I adapt this technique by maintaining its connection in an "environmental" sense. I see connections between the flâneuse as an eco-conscious position and the minimal aesthetic I so admire in Amy Hempel's short fiction.

A relative of the "ambivalent" flâneur is the Situationists and their descendents such as Will Self and Ian Sinclair. The Situationist's core ideas include psychogeography and the "dérive," which is a stroll that has a primarily aim of subverting the "spectacle" of capitalism in order to have a more "authentic" experience (Plant 6). The dérive came out of ideas of Dada and Surrealism. Lauren Elkin describes the Situationist philosophy as one where "strolling becomes drifting and detached observation becomes a critique of post-war-urbanism" (Elkin 18). The tradition is decidedly male as Elkin points out:

> these late-century heirs to the Situationists also inherited Baudelaire's blinkered approach to the women on the pavement. Self has declared—not without some

> personal disappointment—psychogeography to be a man's work, confirming the walker in the city as a figure of masculine privilege. (Elkin 19)

One wonders about the privilege to escape from the spectacle when one is not both subject and object. How does positioning oneself—or being positioned—as peripheral negate the so-called "authenticity" prescribed by psychogeography or "deep topography"? And how might that negation in fact connect women to their environment in interesting ways?

The "peripheral" position of women who inhabit the perspective I describe may also be labeled "detached," but this is often a detachment borne out of caution or attunement to environment rather than *escape* into its chance. I believe such characters and their perspectives are actually *full* of emotion and feeling alongside observation. My characters observe yet intensely feel an acute loss of place, a societal displacement in more ways than one. My characters are subtly introspective and hypervigilant, conditioned to be cautious alone in the urban environment, but emotionally aware of their surroundings, and therefore connected to them. This calibration of one's movement through place makes this type of project, to my mind, environmental literature.

Recent ecocriticism has pushed toward expanding the categories of what's considered environmental writing, pointing to the ways in which historically, ecocriticism came out of a white, male understanding of solo retreat into nature. In *Queer Environmentality*, ecocritic Robert Azarello pushes for an ecocriticism, or a queer environmentality that incorporates elements of queer theory and ecofeminism. This perspective influences my project as well, which often takes a single woman as a person peripheral and marginal in many ways to heteronormative family life and culture (in addition to the immediate crowd). Azarello explains:

> Unlike an ecocriticism or environmental philosophy that tries to ground itself in objective science, and unlike a queer ecofeminism that singularly focuses on domination, queer environmentality, as a habit of thought and mode of reading, has a different and more complex aim. . .[one that allows] the maturity of belief in seeing the other-than-human world in all its non-human-ness, its poetic complexity and queerness. (28)

Azarello also mentions the schism between traditional ecocriticism and environmental justice. Both the approaches of environmental justice, which Azarello seems to admire and his own understanding of queer environmentality emphasize a literature and empathy beyond the self and it is the aim of my stories to show characters who move simultaneously inward and outward. Many of my narrators are educated, middle-class white women (the subject position I am most familiar with and often write from as it is my own) and it is my hope that I can create privilege-aware characters who also demonstrate the particular ways they navigate place and contemporary society. As flâneuses, there is a particular emphasis on the artistic wanderer, the one who defies societal expectation. At the same time, the women in my stories avoid true ambivalence while still running into the limits of empathy under 21st-century capitalism. In the future, I design to write more explicitly about characters who are aware of the problematics of a history of colonialism, racism, and slavery; they are aware of ableism and the ableist ability even behind the idea of "walking."

My writing aims to consider the flâneuse as a mobile woman with agency, but I also want to think about this figure in terms of the single woman, the woman alone. In her recent book, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, Lauren Elkin

provides a series of questions that apply to the woman flâneur, and they also work as a framing device for some of my main concerns in this project:

> [A]re we individuals or are we part of the crowd? Do we want to stand out or blend in? Is that even possible? How do we--no matter what our gender--want to be seen in public? Do we want to attract or escape the gaze? Be independent and invisible? Remarkable or unremarked upon? (2)

I think of these questions as those my characters also ask, if sometimes unconsciously, and I want to pay particular attention to how my protagonists navigate urban and regional spaces. As I was drafting, having several stories linked by character allowed me to return to themes and ideas cyclically as well as to examine these questions in various ways through tone, voice, and distance at various ages throughout my characters' lives. The form of a partially linked collection also allows for questions and unknowing, for answers to remain murky, for characters to both remain suspended in time *and* revisited.

Karen E. Weekes makes the case for women-authored linked collections, specifically, by saying, "this structure replicates the complexity of women's identities: it reflects attempts to connect these fragments in a meaningful way, to create a fulfilling and unified self" (i). In the various stories Weekes discusses she mentions linked collections as tools to bring together identities in discord, bringing together a multifaceted experience of "women in conflict with themselves and various aspects of their culture" (17). For me, the linked collection works as a way to provide non-linear and unresolved glimpses of women's lives, relationships, families, and careers in a story with a non-romantic overall trajectory. It makes sense to jump around in time to underscore the presence of the past and the presence of constraining gender realities in these characters' lives and the places they navigate.

In addition to the fragments of stories and lives present in the linked story form, Elizabeth Wilson also makes a connection to the "fragmentary" nature of cities, thus underlining my case for developing fictional representations of the flâneuse in short fiction. She says:

> For Benjamin the metropolis is a labyrinth. The overused adjective 'fragmentary' is appropriate here, because what distinguishes great city life from rural existence is that we constantly brush against strangers; we observe bits of the 'stories' men and women carry with them, but never learn their conclusions; life ceases to form itself into epic or narrative, becoming instead a short story, dreamlike, insubstantial or ambiguous. . .The fragmentary and incomplete nature or urban experience generates its melancholy—we experience a sense of nostalgia, of loss for lives we have never known, of experiences we can only guess at. (73)

I am interested in voices that navigate the "labyrinth" of both cities and 20th/21st century suburbia/exurbia and the nonlinear time and jumps in perspective will serve to underscore a vignette like quality of attention in contemporary life, the necessarily fleeting attentions due to the energetic and empathic limits of the female experience under late capitalism. My characters, though flawed, will often, at some level, want to help others, to create change and they will observe in a way that is ultimately beyond the self, looking out to their experiences within the context of a country with historic and ongoing oppressions.

It is important to note here the limits of considering this kind of perspective solely via ideas of gender. It is the identity I have chosen to focus on, but there are many perspectives and means to think about the ways certain bodies and identities move through space that I regretfully lack the space to cover comprehensively. In Garnette Cardogan's essay, "Walking While Black,"

he discusses a different visibility and the danger he faces in the crowd as a black man, explaining that, though he loved to walk,

> [in] this city of exuberant streets, walking became a complex and often oppressive negotiation. I would see a white woman walking toward me at night and cross the street to reassure her that she was safe. I would forget something at home but not immediately turn around if someone was behind me, because I discovered that a sudden backtrack could cause alarm. (I had a cardinal rule: Keep a wide perimeter from people who might consider me a danger. If not, danger might visit me.) (Cardogan)

The "exuberant streets" that Cardogan wishes to walk with ambivalence becomes dangerous due to the racism of others in the crowd. As I continue considering this perspective I have written about here, I wish to write more stories where the characters who share my subject position do more to interrogate their whiteness within the story's arc.

As I aim to build the inclusive and anti-oppressive considerations of my protagonists, so do I wish to further explore the abilities of non-linear organization to reflect those "non-masterful," yet reactive and compassionate thoughts and feelings of my protagonists. In this project, I begin to consciously adapt Solnit's concept of "meandering" to narrative form. In doing so, I explore how landscapes and women have always been objectified by the implied "universal subject," which philosophy and aesthetics have always defined as the white male European subject. In looking at the agency of the flâneuse's "walk" I examine what occurs when the object becomes a self-designated subject (while still remaining, in the eyes of others, an object). I examine how the female protagonist negotiates her subjectivity in American space, and having been both subject and object, how she interacts with place, and the social history of American

landscape differently. Taking the non-linear meander as a model, I will now explore the capacious and aspirational perspective of the flâneuse via a brief series of critical-creative "walks."

Walk 1: Watching the People Watching

The women at the center of my writings are walled off in some way; there is a layer between them and the world. I've been told this over and over in the writing workshops I've attended, that my fiction protagonists and the speakers of my poems feel "detached," that I should remedy this problem. It's not that I think these are assessments are wrong really, but I do wonder if their corrective intentions diminish a gendered experience of space.

Yesterday, I took a walk around my neighborhood with my small, reactive terrier. It was a football Saturday in a town where football consumes everything on game days—the campus, the roadways, the sidewalks. The library is shut down and there are RVs and sports gear and discarded cups as far as the eye can see. My little dog barked at three men in matching hats as they walked to a tailgate, or from the game, or perhaps across town for more revelry. Families crowded around televisions in a parking lot. My dog and I escaped the noise of the spectators into a small park and walked its empty paths, first by a creek and then winding underneath an old 19th-century railroad trestle. There wasn't a person or pet in sight beyond the park border; my dog was free to trot along undisturbed.

The culture of game days is one I have long felt estranged from; one from which I have perhaps intentionally distanced myself. It reminds me of feeling younger and more unsure, of being in college, of never feeling safe in a surrounding culture dominated by masculinity and its whims.

As I'm writing this, the past weeks have been filled with coverage of—and reactions to—the Brett Kavanaugh hearings and of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's brave testimony. I was brought to tears by the description in a *New York Times* article of women watching the hearings in salons, in hotel lobbies, on the seatback screens of airplanes (Healy and Stockman). Most women I know are reeling, faced with a large portion of the country that doesn't seem to *care*, doesn't

even think sexual assault would or should deem a man unworthy of a lifetime appointment with the highest court in the land. It's demoralizing and painful. Of course it is.

Throughout the hearings there have been moments of profound heartbreak and those of everyday, but powerful estrangement. The questioning of the victim over and over. The "boys will be boys"-style defense in every comment thread. There is a constant reorienting to the sexual assaulter—*his* future, *his* career. These responses are so familiar and yet they gain new poignancy in this national drama. Women are constantly making visible the everyday threats and cruelty that have forever been a staple of our lives.

There is a separateness I feel and which in turn permeates the voices and actions of my characters. It comes from the tired and tragic feelings of exhaustion, dismissal, unfair caution, and worry familiar to many women. There is the fear of being afraid in a room full of men; there is a sense that you have always sat outside a culture of men, looking in. I notice how in many books and stories, a feminine voice who embodies a cautious or even unconscious "detachment" borne of years of unfair, even cruel treatment at the hands of men. In the world of men.

"Detachment" is the word I used above, but it has never felt like the right word. I now realize, however, that it is *not* always detachment, so much as a misreading of what I've come to recognize in literature as the voice of the flâneuse—a woman observing the public, wary of the crowd, while at the same time even reveling in the freedom of being alone. I found evidence of my rebuttal of this idea of "detachment" in a 2003 interview with Amy Hempel in the *Paris Review*. I actually remember saying, "Yes!" out loud to the computer when I read this quote a few years ago as it captures so well the feelings I have about my narrators and speakers and about the protagonists in many of the books I gravitate toward, including Hempel's.

> Interviewer: In that book [*Reasons to Live*] you began using a kind of signature, using the peripheral figure, one commenting on the action between others and detached from the goings-on.
>
> Hempel: No, no—the peripheral figure is anything but detached. On the periphery you feel a little more because you're on the edge. I remember going to these huge rock concerts in San Francisco in the seventies and I'd be on the edge, not watching the performer but the people watching the performer. Much more interesting. ("The Art of Fiction" no. 176)

Reading this portion of the interview was helpful in clarifying my own similar attitude about this "peripheral" position and my intuited sense that it was actually full of emotion and feeling, but also full of observation. I seek these introspective and hypervigilant women-identified voices as a reader always. These moments of everyday alienation are something I also aim to represent in my own writing.

Estrangement from culture and environment happens in many different ways and the voice I am discussing is just one type of response among many. I hope, as a white woman, to write voices that consider subject position and privilege within explorations of space and estrangement. In short, I seek to recognize the voice of the flâneuse in literature, but also to imagine its most inclusive potentialities.

A past workshop comment about one of my narrators said, *She seems separate from her surroundings somehow.* Yes, I think. Somehow. When I recognize a similar quality in other narrators, other authors, I feel a spark of familiarity. What one reader sees as "detached" another reads as self-protective. But how common is it for readers to read looking for a breezy, or self-apparent environmental ownership, one so visible in the many masculine and celebrated stories

of literature? There *is* agency in the literature of the flâneuse; there *is* a profound connection to the surrounding world. And there are attempts at honest portrayals of navigating that world as a particular woman in a time and place. As just one kind of voice reacting. These voices are "not watching the performer, but watching the people watching the performer." And, as all women have been so starkly reminded over these past weeks, they are walking through a culture that doesn't regularly believe women's testimony and, when it does, doesn't often care.

Walk 2: Finding Corners

When I was nineteen, I went to London and, as if for the first time, felt while walking the old and twisting streets, the simultaneous thrill and melancholy of solitude. It was also in London, at special exhibit I attended for class, that I first saw Edward Hopper's *Automat*, a 1927 painting of a woman sitting alone at the café, which was on loan from the Des Moines Art Center. The woman in this painting is not eating, but she has a teacup in her hand and is looking down toward the saucer. Alain de Botton says of the painting:

> Hopper invites us to feel empathy with the woman in her isolation. She seems dignified and generous, only perhaps a little too trusting, a little naïve—as if she has knocked against a hard corner of the world. The artist puts us on her side, the side of the outsider against the insiders.

I read this passage years later, but it articulated this feeling I had of being aligned with this woman. I didn't pity her; I was her. I had begun feeling more comfortable in isolation the year before when I'd started eating alone. In the mornings, in my college cafeteria, I would take my breakfast and find a corner away from the other freshman who were so desperate to eat with another person that they would spend awkward meals with anyone, everyone. I wasn't ready for small talk before an 8 a.m. class. A quick internet search reveals that college is a popular site of initial forays into solo dining; I turned up several college-paper op-eds detailing the small joys of eating alone.

These days, I eat alone all the time. I'm single and finishing up a PhD program, shuttling between teaching, meetings, writing center consultations, and work in my library carrel. I love to take a break in the middle of the day and eat somewhere while I continue to work or just scroll

through social media. There is a restaurant on the east side of Athens where I go when I want to unwind, celebrate, treat. I go there in part because I will rarely run into anyone I know.

I eat alone so often that I forget it's unnerving for so many other people. M.F.K. Fisher, who dealing with more social stigma to this practice, wrote about dining alone even at home as a kind of compromise. She says, "I felt firmly then, as I do this very minute, that snug misanthropic solitude is better than hit-or-miss congeniality. If *One* could not be with me, 'feasting in silent sympathy,' then I was my best companion."

Perhaps *too* romantically, I have often linked solo dining with writing and observation; it is a freedom to be in one's own thoughts. In Stephanie Rosenbloom's essay "Eating Alone," she says, "To eat out alone is to partake of a city." To go out into the world and eat a meal with myself can connect me to my environment; it can make me feel like I know something about a place and that it's possible to know this thing all on my own.

In my master's program, I liked to try new places and I would bring along a book, often reading at the bar and ordering a beer on a Saturday night. Cities are more amenable to such action; no one would have looked at me strangely in Chicago, but in suburban Iowa, it invited the stares and comments of others. The pleasures of eating alone—particularly for women—exists often side-by-side by the uninvited comments of men. The unaccompanied woman, even if she is wearing headphones or has a book open on her lap, often has to ward off unwanted conversations. It is tiring—our careful placation, the subtle and evasive flattery when we just want to be left undisturbed.

While the solo restaurant eater has more celebrants, the public snacker can remain a target of disgust and judgement. But not everyone has the leisure time or money to take their solitary meals in a dining establishment; sometimes we must eat wherever we have time, in

whatever breaks materialize. On the bus or while walking or sitting on a bench. In *Taste*, Liza Corsillo defends eating in public in both writing and illustration, including drawings and captions of people like "man using cell phone to crack shell of his hard-boiled egg," "nut mix throw back," "the end of a salad," and "avocado toast while scrolling." Corsillo says, "Who among us has the luxury of leaving work in time to prep, cook, and sit down to dinner at a reasonable hour? That kind of wholesome lifestyle must be bought and skillfully organized, a privilege we don't all have." I find myself often snacking on the go to save money and time, but as someone who is not thin, I admit to feeling more self-conscious about any public eating that occurs without context of restaurant or café. I sense my choices and timing to be more open to scrutiny.

I love eating alone, but I also think it's possible to overstate the pleasure. To become out of balance. Just as a friend has reminded me, it can be tiring for extroverts to have introversion relentlessly over-championed in recent years, sometimes eating alone too often can reflect a deeper isolation, a cutting of oneself off from the world around us. As James Hall explains, research done through the Waitrose Food and Drink Report for 2017–18, confirms a rise in solo dining and explained that our cell phones are partly behind this increase ("Dinner For One"). In the report, women especially cited their phones as allowing them to dine alone more frequently than before. I don't necessarily think it is a bad thing that phones provide comfort and connection, but I recognize in myself the need to sometimes push beyond the ease of a solitary dinner into the restorative social experience of a shared meal. It's true that I don't always want to eat alone. But sometimes it is also perfect and quiet. Sometimes, I am off the side and yet, in my own way, part of everything at once.

Walk 3: Movement is Enough

Five years ago, I was standing in my house—a large fading Victorian with bad carpet and cracked shingles. I lived in this house with three other graduate students. Two of them were writers and we were having a party. I remember we had just hosted a reading in our living room where, along with others, I read some poems. I was wearing my favorite black wrap dress and I was drinking a glass of cheap red wine. Another graduate student came up to me and we began talking. He told me he liked my poems and I can't remember what else we talked about. What I do remember is him reaching out to touch my arm, and saying "Can I just say? Beth and I were talking the other day and we can't believe you're single. How are *you* still single?"

At the time, I said thank you and shrugged. *How are you still single?* I was supposed to take this as the *ultimate* compliment. I think I took it positively. I think felt isolated within it.

In her 2012 book-length study, *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism*, feminist critic Anthea Taylor argues:

> to be partnered is yet seen as a universal feminine desire that cuts across class and race lines, therefore narratives about remedying singleness relentlessly populate movie and television screens, books, and popular music. . . (12)

I feel this projected "universal desire" acutely. I still worry about showing up at the wedding alone. I shirk the questions and expectations. Taylor also provides evidence to disprove that the single woman as a cultural idea is now "celebrated where once she was denigrated" (7). Taylor demonstrates, that in fact, no: "[she] remains a figure of discursive unease (or dis-ease)" (7). It's clear singleness makes some people uncomfortable. During my master's program, two engaged friends had potlucks to which they only invited other couples—another colleague

started garnering invitations once he began seeing somebody. Only the normative experience was welcome and that has always filled me with dread.

Perhaps that dread has led to my increased interest in the solitary walker, in the woman who explores her environment by moving *through* it, no particular end in mind. Though I am deeply interested in urban walking, I am interested in thinking about the perspective beyond the limits of the city. There is a larger way of moving through the world in solitary perspective, in choosing to not see oneself as moving toward a romantic conclusion at all times. I often want that movement to be enough.

Does it remain pathetic to write about singleness? Does it remain pathetic to talk about it? I want there to be a space for voices who are lonely, but aren't *always* lonely, for those who sometimes desire a partner, but often are completely fine. I always want to read more books about single women, but not only about single women fixing their solitary status as if it's a problem. I want to read more books about single women of color, nonbinary uncoupled people, about LGBT characters, including asexual and demisexual people whose story isn't about a journey toward romance, toward partnership, toward conventional couplehood. There has been a recent spate of celebrated books about single women, though as Tara Wanda Merrigan points out, most of them are by white women ("The Year in Single Women"). Rebecca Traister's *All the Single Ladies : Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* does take a look at a history of a wider racial and class demographic, pointing to how the lives and activism of single women has often led to lasting change in America. Traister also points to the problem in books. She says, "[m]arriage, it seemed to me, walled my favorite fictional women off from the worlds in which they had once run free, or, if not free, then at least forward, with currents of narrative possibility at their backs." Narratively, single characters are often moving toward

change and partnership; it seems both a problem of cultural expectation and a rigid allegiance to certain norms of narrative structure. I welcome structures that meander and I want to see more portrayals of single women with vastly varying narratives.

Walk 4: Walking the Mall

For the last month, I have been living in winter. I usually live in milder Georgia where I am finishing my P.h.D. program but have returned to my parents' house in Michigan during holiday break. Lately, I have been retreating to their house for all of my breaks—doing, as a 33-year-old woman, what my parents wished I had done as a 19-year-old. They live on a small inland lake and there are few things I like more than winter lakes; they are such still, unpeopled places.

This winter month has oscillated between warm and cold, but I haven't been walking much, not as much as I planned. There is a park near my parents' house with a path that rings another small lake. I walk there at least once each winter, vowing each time to do so more. My mother walks there often. After a snow, it is the perfect place for solo walking. Of course, it is best when sunny and crunchy and fresh. For the few days before I leave for my last semester of graduate school, however; it has been gray with a near-constant ice drizzle. I go to the mall and walk its carpeted hallways but get pulled into stores and buy a couple of shirts I don't need.

Lots of people walk the mall here in winter. The one close to home is one-level and circular; one lap around is about a mile. One of the state's largest walking clubs meets at the mall and the building opens early for them—seemingly empty, but with walkers moving powerfully through the space alongside the quiet work of employees setting up the day. Raising gates and folding displays.

As a younger person, I may have scoffed at mall walking. Go on a real hike, I might have thought. Get away from consumerism. (I think my remembrance of hypothetical selves is harsher than I actually was.) But those kinds of judgements have fallen away as they tend to do. Michigan—designed so thoroughly for its auto industry—can seem to lack walkable spaces. It

makes so much more sense to me to walk the bare, yet colorful mannequin-lined hallways in the mornings before work. Before the day begins in earnest.

There is a long history and tension between shopping and flânerie, particularly when thinking about the flâneuse. As critic Ruth E. Iskin notes Balzac, in 1845, recognized the presence of women in public spaces partaking in a kind of flânerie using "common strategies of shopping and walking quickly, which women used to maintain their respectability in the city" (114). Lauren Elkin argues for the long tradition of the flâneuse using, in part, the the work of David Garrioch to show the eighteenth-century Parisian, women-dominated market spaces as an example of the fact "that, in a way, the streets belonged to women" (Elkin 14). There remains to the present a tension between the idea of "shopping" being a limiting activity, but one which has historically freed women to explore and travel beyond the confines of home. There also remains the class tension between salesperson and shopper, but, I argue, plenty to suggest despite rampant systemic inequities, a way of seeing flânerie as able to encompass *both/many* ways of navigating public space within a marginalized body/identity/perspective.

Iskin also describes the connection Walter Benjamin made between flânerie and consumerism, including in her argument Benjamin's observation that "the department store is the last promenade for the flaneur." Iskin goes on to connect this to the work of historian Lisa Tiersten who explained "the very scale of the place, the sense of open space seemed to make the store a city in itself" (Tiersten, qtd. in Iskin, 114). The mall also becomes its own city space, a seeming compromise for those of us wary of American consumer culture, but yet still, despite all of that, full of these empowered (as well as consumer-culturally prescribed) movements through space.

During my master's program, I took an architecture class on the history of the American city, a class which I was intensely interested in and which continues to influence my writing and work. One of my favorite sections was learning about the history and evolution of shopping malls, from their inception to the rise of "deadmalls," also called "ghost malls," which are abandoned shopping mall structures that proliferated beginning in the 1990s (with the growing popularity of online shopping) and which intensified after the Great Recession. It was in this class that I learned about the first shopping mall, the Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, which opened in 1956. The architect Victor Gruen would later come to regret the influence of his design, which was copied by malls across America. He saw his initial mall as full of green plant life and places for people to come together, taking inspiration from the public, open-air squares of Vienna (Garfield). He wanted the shopping mall to correct the lack of gathering spaces in suburban towns and initially intended it to include a library, town hall, and police department. The mall was designed with car culture in mind, however; with ample parking. In reality, the trend further contributed to the racist and classist isolation of white suburban culture. It was in many ways, designed for women as a destination away from their suburban houses, but it was designed for a particular woman and it holds all of those inequities within its intentions and history. It was limiting and freeing at same time, as it remains today (Garfield).

As someone who grew up in the suburban Midwest and as someone who used malls as a teenager as a space away from parents to gather with friends, it was so interesting to me to think about Gruen's plans and how, in my mid-twenties, especially, I considered the shopping mall to be the absolute antithesis of walking Vienna's squares. I considered it completely separate from the realm of the outdoor spaces of any European or older, more walkable American city, for that matter. It was so far from any idea of the flâneuse that I might have had then. The contradictions

of the mall and its evolution and, in many cases, abandonment, is topic I keep returning to and one I plan to write even more about.

A year ago, someone posted on Facebook an article in the *New Yorker* by Jia Tolentino titled "The Overwhelming Emotion of Hearing Toto's 'Africa' Remixed to Sound Like It's Playing in an Empty Mall." I watched and listened to the animated YouTube video by Cecil Robert and shared the article about it on my own news feed saying, "I'm kind of obsessed with this."

There *is* something incredibly affecting about the tinny airiness of the song floating through an imagined ghost mall. The accompanying image of the quiet mall never changes—light shines in from high windows on the left illuminating the pink-hued tile and a single (probably faux) potted plant. Empty glass storefronts stand in relative darkness on the right side of the mall promenade. The hallway perspective stretches into the distance suggesting there is vast empty space out of view. Tolentino says, "Our lives increasingly play out in virtual spaces: instead of going to malls, we surf on Amazon; many of us would happily forgo the mess of a party to stay home and flirt through an app." The song and the mall image makes me feel somehow like a play piece in Mall Madness, the board game I had as a kid that gave fake credit cards to all of its juvenile participants. Born in the mid 1980s, my entire early life was full of a particular late-century consumerism. And now, conflictingly, I am nostalgic for it.

I have always been drawn toward abandoned places (I wrote a whole series of poems about them in my first book.) But also, it is easy—often problematically so—to sentimentalize emptiness. I can't help but be drawn toward their echoes and evocation of solitude. Their unpeopled stretches of space.

Walk 5: The Context Around Us

My friend introduced me to the work of Lisa Robertson, recommending her *Occasional Work and Seven Walks and the Office for Soft Architecture.* And I see what she sees in Robertson, a writer for whom, according to critics Ryan Fitzpatrick and Susan Rudy, "space is not reducible to singular, official narratives, but is the result of the complex and contradictory accretion of multiple historical trajectories" (Fitzpatrick & Rudy 173). It's what I've been calling in my own writing, *layers* of place.

Reading Lisa Robertson, I become enamored by the text's connections to disappearing and ever-changing structures. She calls her perspective in these essays the "Office for Soft Architecture" and she uses official-adjacent language to comment on different "structures," that may even be temporary or in motion, such as scaffolding, gardens, and fountains.

Noting the fact that I am walking and writing through constantly changing spaces with deeply layered (and often troubling) histories is something I am trying to do more and more. It is an aspirational responsibility, I think, to be aware of the time you are traversing and, especially, the people who have been wronged in that space. Robertson, writing about the impulse to create the Office and to write about her city, says:

> The Office for Soft Architecture came into being as I watched the city of Vancouver dissolve in the fluid called money. Buildings disappeared into newness. I tried to recall spaces, but what I remembered was surfaces. Here and there money had tarried. The result seemed emotional. I wanted to document this process. I began to research the history of surfaces. I included my own desires in the research. In this way, I became multiple. (Robertson 1)

This catalog of motivation serves to create a sidelined personal presence in the larger historical motions of place. “The result seemed emotional” creates a narrative distance; we can barely find a subject in Robertson’s institutional observations. Critics Fitzpatrick and Rudy also remind the reader in their article on Robertson, the geographer Doreen Massey, who is one of the foremost thinkers on the shifting identities of place, was an influence on Robertson. Massey asks—as Fitzpatrick and Rudy borrow for their title—“if everything is moving where is here?” (Massey qtd. in Fitzpatrick & Rudy 173). Fitzpatrick & Rudy connect Robertson’s own transient moves between countries and continents to their own upheavals of location as academics (I can relate).

Brenda Coultas is another contemporary poet who uses the position of the flâneuse to document an elegiac connection to a changing landscape. Her collection *A Handmade Museum*, in part, chronicles observations of her changing neighborhood, the Bowery at two periods: before 1900 and after September 11, 2001. She documents, in particular, a part of the Bowery that includes historic single-room occupancy hotels that, in 2001, had been scheduled for demolition. In the introduction to this part of her book called “The Bowery Project,” Coultas explains,

> I lived a block from this section and traveled through it daily. My intent was not to romanticize the suffering or demonize the Bowery or its residents, but rather to observe the changes the Bowery was currently undergoing and to write about own dilemma and identification as a citizen one paycheck away from the street. (11)

In this project, Coultas is both within and removed from that which is observed; she becomes insider and outsider. Her style can tend toward the concrete amalgam or catalog of images; she undertakes a record of what is there, beyond the self. In “At the End of the Month in the Beginning of the Year” she writes:

> Things given back to the street: green sweater (pulled from trash and dry-cleaned), found basket (torn handle). (February 2, 2002)
>
> A futon mattress, the frame torn into smaller pieces, brown felt western hat (February 23, 2002, Bowery & Houston)
>
> Ice cream or frostydrinkmaker machine on its back. I stopped to examine it and to help a man who was lifting a wheelchair up and over a 6-ft high fence. He shook my hand. Bought 8 T-shirts that said something about New York, that I loved it or that I had seen Little Italy or Chinatown or Spider-Man, bought Gucci watch, $10, on Canal St. (June 15, 2002, Lower East Side) (40)

In this poem excerpt, Coultas demonstrates the accumulative power of these listed objects. The objects are personified, like "the frostydrinkmaker machine on its back" to suggest the ways society and capitalism are abandoning people (and evidence of them in their discarded belongings) by removing a place. Coultas is not completely removed from the systems at work that both change and destroy an environment. Similarly, Coultas is framing these details seemingly aware of the way her gaze might do more to valorize a sort of urban picturesque.

Moving forward, I aim to more completely examine my own surrounding's layers and to acknowledge my role in a changing space. As Robertson says, "we were radically inseparable from the context we disturbed" (Robertson 196). I think that inseparability—from layers, time, capitalism, oppressive structures—is the awareness that I want to weave into my narratives as I continue to compose and revise.

CHAPTER 2

WITH LOVE FROM ALL OF US:

STORIES

"If everything is moving where is here?" –Doreen Massey, *for space*

With Love from All of Us

My younger sister became obsessed with Baby Jessica: the fifty-eight hour media incident, the baby down the well. Erin nearly buzzed with curiosity—this rubbernecked fascination—and from the kitchen I could see her watching the news and adjusting the volume. I could hear the reporter's incremental updates.

"Sometimes it takes hours to drill even an inch," the woman said.

My six-year-old daughter, Paige, was fascinated too. I saw the movement behind her eyes, this consideration of falling and wells. "Where's Midland?" she asked. "How far away is Texas?"

"Miles and miles."

"How many?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm not good with distance."

"Two days by car," Erin said, her gaze still fixed to the screen.

They say the whole country waited for rescue from the twenty-two-foot well—the well only eight inches across like a straw in the Earth. It's like we could see the girl down there: her

foot jammed up near her head, the blood and feeling draining from her toes. I imagined she looked toward that hole of sky. When she wasn't crying, she sang songs.

Almost two years before, and months before her due date, Erin had announcements printed up: *Jessica Marie Watts* in curling script next to a fat, pink stork. The stork looked sly, or curious, depending on your angle, but I never pointed that out. I just watched the way events happened to my sister. And she did seem happy, inwardly pleased in a secretive way that I didn't understand. She was twenty-eight back then and so certain, so thrilled.

Paige was four at the time and she'd crawl into her aunt's lap. There was something grossly maternal about Erin, an unspoken closeness between the two of them. They would sit and point out passing neighbors, matching them with members of the animal kingdom. He looks like a rhino, him a greyhound. That kind of thing.

Erin had a boyfriend before all this. *Baby,* he'd call her. *Let's make a family,* he'd say. He didn't mean it, and as these things usually go; everyone knew it but her.

When he finally left, her friends came over to smooth her hair, her clothes; it didn't matter. They brought muffins and lemonade. I remember them like a swarm of young women, like a whole cacophony of coos. I remember when they came back a few months later, too, but by that time Erin had no patience for comfort. She'd lost her baby. I remember showing those women to the door. They were being kind, but she wanted everyone out. "She can't see you," I told them. "She can't see anyone."

When that Midland girl fell in the well, something budged in Erin's mind. Nearly all of that October revolved around a child we'd never met. It was strange how two and a half days could dwarf a whole month. Distort a whole season. At the time, I had wanted to plan a party for

Erin's birthday and her new job as an insurance agent. Erin was turning thirty just before Halloween.

It was the second week of October, just two days until we'd start thinking about Texas and babies. Paige and I went out to rake the leaves. "For Aunt's Erin's party," I told her. I showed her where to set the tarp. She crouched and spread the blue plastic flat like a bed sheet, lined up the edges square to the house.

"Does Aunt Erin know?" Paige bolted upright, the question coming to her in a blast. "About the party?" she asked.

"Sure," I told her. "I'll tell her soon."

Paige nodded and kicked a leaf as it flapped away. I worked without speaking for a while, listened to Paige humming as she traced a stone through the dirt. After we carried several tarpfuls of leaves to the woods, it began to rain. I motioned for Paige to join me under the plastic and we hurried inside, trailing leaves through the front hall.

By the window, we watched the rain pick up. We saw Erin's car pull up the drive. When Erin came in, she took off her shoes and draped her coat over the hallway bench. She rolled her wet jeans above her socks and started picking up fallen leaves in the entryway. "What's with the forest floor?" she asked. She threw the leaves outside and, for a moment, I could hear the steady sound of downpour through the open door.

"We raked," I told her. I felt like I was yelling. "To clean up for your party." I steadied myself, placed my hands on my hips.

Erin closed the door and she walked into the kitchen and let her body drop into a chair. She ran a hand through her short, brown hair and tugged on the wispy ends.

“There’s just no need,” she said and turned to face me. “Who wants to be the focus of the fuss?”

I sat down next to her. Paige sensed our stalemate and tucked her knees beneath herself on the kitchen chair. I saw Erin looking out the window at our half-tidied lawn, at the rake still lying on a wet pile of leaves.

Erin pushed against her thighs to stand up. “Fine,” she said, as she walked to her room. “I'll do this for you.” She shut the door behind her.

Erin and I are two years apart and when we were kids, I thought of us as a team. I really did. A team against parents, school—whatever or whomever had wronged us. We had different responses to the same problems, but we shared a propensity to get stuck, or hung up, on life’s injustices. I pressed feelings inside like balls of amber, these tiny accumulations of hardened sap. Erin exploded in abrupt and inscrutable fits. She’d throw papers on the lawn, bury toys in the yard. I was always curious by how taken she’d become, how gripped. I think she always felt deeply, more completely.

Once, when I was nine, the day after our grandfather died, an older cousin took us to the aquarium. Erin told me, surrounded by fish, that she could imagine a new way to breathe. I still think of that six-year-old girl, that buffer of water. Erin reached out her hand and followed a bright, yellow fish with her finger. After she traced its path, she turned to me with a cagey smile. “I would’ve touched his eye just then,” she said, barely suppressing a giggle.

That day, something clicked for her. For a brief, zealous blitz, she became interested in fish. She read my science books; she stumbled through passages aloud. For a spell of two or three weeks, I could picture her at sea, a scientist on some kind of mission. I thought maybe I'd

join her, but our career plans were dashed quickly. Neither of us had any patience for science. We weren't scholars at all. But whatever we were, we were in it together, throughout all our gulpy, childhood passions. I remember we'd sit on our bedroom floor cutting words and letters from magazines. We'd make ransom notes for ourselves with the mismatched characters of *Life* and *Time*. We'd imagine the sums our parents would pay, the lengths they would go, the bodies of water they'd cross just to get us back.

The day after raking, I brought home invitations. "Time to set a date," I said.

Erin raised her eyebrows. "Is this a wedding?" she asked. "Where are the husbands?" She waved her arm around the room to indicate our dearth of husbands.

I felt my jaw clench. "Sorry," she said.

Erin always forgot how I was. How I could be undone by something like that. When she said such things, I didn't respond. My husband was gone; she never had one.

Paige carried her backpack from her room and set it on a chair; she then feigned a search for a lost worksheet or pen. I peeled back the cellophane on the box and removed a stack of small pink and green cards. *Help us celebrate*, they said. On each card a skirted hippo balanced triumphantly on a beach ball, surrounded by balloons.

Erin stared at our fish, Mo, and tapped on the tank before sitting down.

"You're not supposed to tap, Aunt Ell," Paige said. She went back to rifling through papers, before she finally pulled a highlighter out of her bag.

"Let me see those." Erin ignored her and reached for the invites. She stared at the cards and splayed them out before her: a row of jowly cartoons in tiny pink skirts. Their toothy, knowing grins.

“Let's have it Saturday.” Erin neatly stacked the invites and set them aside. “Let's just call people. Get it done.”

“Okay,” I said. I reached for the phone.

Erin moved in with me when she was pregnant. Paige was a little confused—her friends had moms and dads, not moms and aunts—but she took well to Erin, better than I’d have thought. I think they found a kindred imagination in each other. Erin engaged in the required pretend-play with a conviction I could never muster. I’d come home to find them stretched out in the basement with their eyes closed. A moment later, they’d weave carelessly around the room between poles and toys. “We’re submarine combatants!” Paige once yelled.

“It’s true!” Erin screamed as she grabbed my arm.

Erin taught my daughter to swim. She couldn’t understand why a five-year-old girl would be afraid of the water. “It’s the water!” she exclaimed. “Don’t you want to be a mermaid? Don’t you want to be weightless?”

“Why would I want that?” Paige asked.

They started slowly at a nearby lake, first on the beach. Erin taught her the principles of the flutter kick, how to scull water with her hands, demonstrating on air. They looked like two beauty queens waving to the lake.

After the lessons on land, Erin would walk her into the water, the small waves lapping Paige’s knees. Erin stood there patiently, supporting her pregnant belly with her hands. Paige sometimes stared down at her own protruding kid-belly in her pink polka-dotted swimsuit as if it would lead her into the waves.

Paige ran crying back to me a couple of times, but after a few days, she really wanted to try. My daughter could possess a disarming and adult seriousness; she said, “I will do it, Mama,” with a nod. Like she'd accepted the high stakes and was ready to move on.

Paige let Erin hold her by the armpits and drag her through the water. “Just keep your mouth closed,” Erin said to her gently. “Now, try putting your face in.”

“I will if you will.”

Erin set her down and waded into deep water. She made sure Paige was looking and dunked her swollen body in the lake. After she came back up, Erin moved toward Paige, arms out. Timidly, Paige got deeper and grabbed onto Erin. I sat on the sand and watched them bobbing underwater together. I saw Paige’s excited gasps for air, the strands of her baby-fine hair in wet sections down her back. By the end of the day, she was treading

“Next comes the front crawl,” Erin said and she wrapped herself in a towel before we went home.

The day after we made the phone calls, I began brainstorming decorations. On my way home from work that night, I stopped at a party store. I stocked up on balloons, ribbon, a *Happy Birthday!* and a *Congrats!* banner to hang on either side of the dining room. I bought several packs of plastic champagne flutes, streamers, plates. I bought two mesh bags of multi-colored, polished glass stones, determined to find a use for them.

“What kind of party is this?” Erin asked. She leaned against the fridge and surveyed my purchases while I emptied the bags. “Isn’t this a little much?”

“I won’t buy anything else,” I told her.

It was a Wednesday. Earlier, at her aunt's home daycare, Baby Jessica's young playmates held her toddler body over the open well and released. We wouldn't hear about it until the following morning when Erin turned on CNN. "For over twenty-four hours, the girl has been stuck," I remember hearing. But recalling Erin looking at me in the kitchen that night, I have trouble reconciling the timeline. Erin was already sinking into something; I could sense her retreating from our plans.

When Erin's baby—her Jessica—died, I researched the causes of stillbirth. The answer might surface in details. At the library, I studied illustrations of babies curled up in utero. Despite all explanation, I imagined the baby stuck, trapped inside my sister. *Placental abruption*, the doctor had told me. His face was soft and kind. *An obstetric catastrophe*, he'd said. And Paige held my hand, confused. I think we both sensed a kind of separation. Something far away. I'd just nodded at everyone, at their sympathy and reasons. My head felt disembodied—joggled through fluids both viscous and dense. Erin was in the hospital for a few days and I sat beside her; I stared silently at her IV. Family and friends came and went; they left flowers.

On the day before Erin came home, I went out and bought a fish tank. A large one I put on the dining room table because there was nowhere else for it to go. I picked out a fish from the store's colorful selection—fish with big eyes and names like designer purses. Paige named him Mo. I looked at Mo in the water after bringing him home. He darted counter-clockwise through the corners of his tank. "I know how you feel Mo," I'd said and I tapped the tank with my nail. It seemed like the right thing to say, to be in cahoots with the fish. Our dog was suspicious and he sat and stared at this fish, an intruder, but I wanted there to be something new in the house. I wanted there to be something else to talk about.

Erin didn't comment for the first couple of days. She just drifted in and out of rooms. On the third night, we were eating dinner and then she turned to me. "I can't even see Paige because of this damn fish tank," she said. Paige stuck out her fork of twirled spaghetti and waved from the other side of the water, giggling.

For a few weeks after Erin's return, we went through a war phase. She and I would sit around for hours watching battle reenactments on television. I would point out the bad acting, the moving, breathing chests of dead and wounded. I found it comforting, these casualties—whole fields of breath. Our favorite movies were about D-Day, the storming of the beaches. We made pacts to go to Normandy, to visit memorials.

On Friday morning, the Baby Jessica coverage was still big news. The first thing Erin did was turn on the TV and she skipped work that day; I heard her call in sick as Paige and I were leaving. I returned to find her on the couch, clutching her wool-socked feet in her hands.

"Did you hear about the man with no collarbone?" she asked me. She craned over the couch and away from the screen. "He can touch the front of both of his shoulders together." She demonstrated by squeezing her own shoulders as far as they would go. "He was going to attempt a rescue." She had begun using the event's newsy jargon.

"What happened?" I asked.

"They are trying something else." She turned her attention back to the newscaster, the camera panning over the crowd—the ladders, the crush of waiting bodies in the small-town backyard. They were all looking at a hole in the ground, ringing around this something unseen.

Paige sat at the table facing the couch. She was cutting out paper dolls and she looked at me shaking her head in disapproval. "I'm concerned," she said, with a doctor's inflection. Erin

would groan when the coverage cut away from the rescue to focus on other events. The president's wife had cancer. Iran had launched a missile.

Paige and I ate grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner. I fed the fish. I always felt antsy if stagnant, so I busied myself with superficial tidying. Stacking the bills and wiping the counter. “The party’s tomorrow,” I finally announced. “Let’s go the store.”

Erin settled deeper into the couch. I saw her kneading the tops of her feet with the pad of her hand. “What if they save her?” she asked. She widened her eyes at the sound of her question. “While we’re gone,” she added.

“I hope they do,” I told her. It was easy for me to say. I tossed Erin a jacket.

In the harsh white of the grocery store, Erin looked anxious yet drained. She walked ahead of Paige and me. She didn’t grab anything, but rushed through the aisles, dodging other shoppers.

“Hand me the milk,” I called out from behind her. She had stopped and was staring at the refrigerator case like she couldn’t see inside it. I nudged her with the cart. Erin pulled a gallon jug off of the shelf and set it in our basket. As we neared the front of the store, she paused in the produce section. She picked up an orange and cupped it, she considered it like she might a baby chick.

“We’re having a party,” I reminded her as we were checking out. “To celebrate you.” I cringed at the sound of my *you*, resenting myself a little for my insistence, and Erin for the way I felt her pushing back.

“Yes,” she said, “Perfect.” Her smile seeped with insincerity. She placed a bag of apples on the conveyer. “Can we go home now?”

The TV was still on when we got back, the background noise more frenzied and loud. Erin rushed toward the commotion and I stayed in the kitchen and unloaded groceries. Paige joined her at the edge of the couch. Even I could feel the buzz of expectation coming from the living room and, pretty soon, I heard faraway voices erupt and cheer. Erin let out a strangled squeak. I walked over and saw she had tears in her eyes. Paige had a scared and wide-eyed look, like she didn't know what to make of any of this.

That night, even after the rescue, Erin remained in front of the television. She had recorded the footage and she repeatedly rewound the tape so that it was on a near-constant loop. There was the huddle of men in T-shirts and caps, the mummy-child gauze-wrapped to a board, the harnessed rescuer swinging the girl to safety. Paramedics lifted her onto a stretcher and loaded her into an ambulance. The crowd clapped and cheered, hooted and whistled.

A reporter explained the technique of water jet cutting used to save the child. A parallel shaft was dug and after diamond-tipped drills proved useless, they used water: a concentrated stream blasting through rock.

At eleven, I urged Erin to go to bed. "Rest up for tomorrow," I said, but she didn't want to go anywhere. I left her like that, watching the news replay and replay.

Sometimes, I wanted to feel angry with Erin for flaunting her sadness, but really, I needed it. Her mourning was solid and touchable. It made everything real.

You're a widow, people would say. *You poor thing*. It always seemed like a label I couldn't let apply to me. Sometimes people would ask me: "Where is Paige's father? Where's Seth?" I tried outright lying, but that didn't sit well. I became adept at avoidance. At least Paige is too young to remember. I never wanted to be a mother, but I wanted to be a wife.

When we were kids, during Erin's fish phase, she read a passage about salmon to me from one of my books. "Listen to me," she said. She read slowly, sounding out the words. "Salmon are oceanic fish breeding in fresh water." I skimmed over her shoulder and explained that after living in the ocean for years, salmon make their way back miles and miles to the same freshwater in which they were hatched. The book called their route a "natal stream," which we had to look up in the dictionary. This phrase made us curious; I had never known this about salmon. I had never really known anything about them. I was indelibly intrigued by their ability to navigate back.

When I was pregnant, Seth would grasp my pregnant belly and make what he termed his whale sounds, these ridiculous low-baying groans. He would lie in bed and make these sounds; he said Paige would echolocate, find her way out. I pretended, too, by expecting his return. After I knew he was gone, after he drove into an icy lake in the upper peninsula and froze. For a while, I still bought him concert tickets; made him appointments. I prepared for an impossible future, one I only imagined he would see.

The next morning when I got up, Erin was already awake. "Party's cancelled," she said casually, a glass of orange juice in her hand. I ignored her, began my day like she hadn't said a word.

A half-hour later, I poured cupcake batter in a tin. I'd readied the house for guests—straightened shoes in the hall, wiped down the bathroom mirror. "I'm serious," Erin reminded me; she grabbed my bag of cupcake liners in protest. "No party," she said, shaking the plastic near my face.

I didn't argue with her. I shut the oven door with unnecessary force. I decided I could leave the laundry folded in a pile. Around noon, Erin left the house. Paige looked to me for instruction. "What now?" her eyes asked. I began making calls.

"Paige is under the weather," I told every guest, anyone who might have come. "So sorry to cancel."

This did not go over well. Paige stomped around furiously, even more angry that she'd been implicated, that I'd lied. She slammed her bedroom door. I was jealous of her reaction and I listened to her sounds of anger crash throughout the house.

Later that evening, I frosted the cupcakes anyway. They sat cooling on the counter for most of the day. From the other room, I heard scissor-snips, the sounds of Erin cutting and clipping.

I walked over and put my ear to her bedroom door. I knocked. She didn't say anything, but I let myself in anyway. Erin was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to a pile of newspapers that she'd bought while she was out. In front of her, she'd placed a shoebox of scraps. Shreds of magazine words speckled her clothes as she glued cutouts to a sheet of Paige's craft paper.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Masochistic scrapbooking," she said, looking up. She rested a pair of scissors on her lap; she stuck and unstuck her fingers, her hands all gummy with glue. She held up a large rectangle of construction paper where she'd pasted headlines about Baby Jessica. Ordeal, suffering, rescue, peril. *Baby, baby, baby.*

"Please," I said, gathering breath, holding and hoarding it in my chest. "Stop."

As a child, I used to imagine the sensation of drowning, examining my fingers underwater in the public pool. I wondered, if I were then rescued, what breathing would feel like

afterward. Some mix of pain and relief. When I first heard about Baby Jessica, I wondered if *she* would drown, but Erin said that, stuck as she was, she wouldn't reach any water. I still thought of that though, and also about Jack and Jill. The tumbling after. My six-year-old self had misinterpreted their fall as *into* the well. I had gruesomely imagined the scene, seeing the cracked bodies of siblings surrounded by cobblestone. I later learned the rest of the rhyme: *Then up Jack got and home did trot*; I learned how he mended his head with vinegar and paper.

"I don't have to stop." Erin held her collage as if mid-presentation. "And who are *you*. . . She paused as though the words she wanted had flown away. She sat there, mouth open, before adding "to talk?" She continued, "I know where you keep your shoebox of junk mail addressed to Seth. There is a credit card offer from last week."

Erin stood so that we were eye-level. Little glossy flecks fell from her pants and onto the floor. I shut my eyes. In my head, I started singing a wordless, tuneless song, something about just wanting to have a party.

"I could just shake you," Erin said. And she did. She grabbed my crossed arms by the elbows; she moved my body toward her and away. I let her do this, feeling the motion through the darkness of my eyelids.

"Why do you say things like that?" I asked, when I opened my eyes. A burning pressure built under my skin. I pulled away from her g rip.

"Why *don't* you?"

I thought of Paige's earlier reaction and decided to try it. I stomped. I let my arms wing in rhythm, their weight adding to my theatric clops. If Erin wanted a response, I could give one. After a few seconds of this, I stopped and dropped my hands to my sides.

"Are you done?" Erin asked. "Feel better?"

I shook my head. “Of course not.” I picked slivers of a magazine ad off her sleeve. “I think Paige needs me to . . . pretend” I said, unsure of the word, like I was searching for a more accurate match. But Erin was right—it had always been easier to ignore myself. To squelch and disguise the various species of grief. I wouldn’t tell her that; we could keep trying these minor physical experiments, letting our shaking and stomping do the work. We had pieces of meaning bouncing off each other in opposite directions, deflecting like separate gleams of refracted light.

“Paige needs me stable,” I added. “Solid.”

“Well, I am not Paige's mother.”

Erin bent her head quietly. I flicked my hands like they were wet. I looked up and down trying to string together thoughts. “Don’t you know that doesn’t matter?” I asked.

Erin put both of her hands on my shoulders. I did the same to her and we stood there like that for a moment, like we were playing a new version of London Bridge. Like we were really falling down. We stared at each other in this kind of wounded face-off. I eventually let go. Despite me, though, some distance had been squeezed, or crushed. There had been this welling up.

The day we didn't have a party, we watched TV. It was the fall of Baby Jessica, the end of our strange and quiet hibernation. We watched some of our favorite war movies, sometimes pausing the battle scenes and rewinding to see them again. It would only be a few more months until we really had a party, one complete with noisemakers and piñatas for Paige's seventh birthday. We’d have cake and streamers, goody bags and balloons.

How do you recreate a life? Baby Jessica had fifteen surgeries and nine blood transfusions. In the articles that came out on the event’s anniversary, or her birthday, they would

always discuss her scars and her deformed foot. In one, I read about a boy in elementary school who called her *Well-Dweller* as if the site were benign as a tree fort, a place chosen away from the world.

Erin and I kept tabs on her life, calculating her age in a given year. After the incident, they sealed up the well ceremoniously, planting flowers on the site of the rescue shaft. Over the well they inscribed: *For Jessica*, dated and followed by: *with love from all of us*.

I made sure Erin watched the tribute. It felt necessary, and final. Like how I once believed a funeral would feel.

Paige would ask about Baby Jessica from time to time. I'd remind her she was safe, suspecting that, even at nine-years-old, Paige had the irrational fear she might fall inside a well.

Paige always tried to understand Erin and me. Once, when she was six and feeding the fish, she asked, "Are all adults like you two?" She held a can of fish food and gestured from me to Erin, seated at the table. Paige let too many flakes fall in the tank. "Hey Mo-Mo," she said while she tapped on the glass. She turned to us and picked up her cup of juice; she said, "Do you know fish breathe by drinking?" She was proud of the facts and she pushed her belly out, exaggerating breathing. In and out. She put her mouth to the straw.

"Don't try it baby," I said, not stopping her as she blew bubbles in her grape juice. I watched the purple liquid spill over her cup, puddling out from the center of the table. Slowly, it pooled and dripped down the leg.

MUSEUM WITHOUT WALLS

The flight to Seoul was long and quiet, but after exiting at the gate Aimee expected more bustle, more noise to greet her. Sunlight emptied through a wall of windows and she crossed between rows of chairs toward the current of travelers. She felt like she moved noiselessly through the bright, scrubbed atrium, surrounded by a dull bubble of language, by people in suits and families toting children, a woman rolling a little lapdog in a wheeled carrier. The view as the plane descended had revealed a city cropped between mountains—tall and short buildings rose out of mist-draped hills—but wandering over the blank airport tile, Aimee felt she could be anywhere at all.

On the flight, she'd overheard a woman talking about a storm coming to Korea. Aimee was worried. She could be stuck in it, and perhaps she shouldn't have come. Aimee was certain she wasn't a good traveler; she preferred to stay in one place, where she was. Unlike her sister Betsy, Aimee didn't need to roam the earth, forever drifting. In search of what, anyway?

At the baggage claim, Aimee saw Betsy right away. Her sister wore leggings and a floral-patterned dress; her hair was cut short and jagged, peeking out of a scarf tied behind her ears. Betsy looked both familiar and strange, revised somehow, like a painting done by a stranger. Someone who didn't know Aimee's sister at all.

Betsy rested her hand on the mound of her stomach with a tenderness Aimee had never seen. Or at least never noticed.

"You're pregnant," Aimee said. It was just like Betsy not to warn her, to let her deduce everything for herself.

“Yes.” Betsy looked down as if in reminder. She fanned her fingers one at a time against her tunic’s stretched flowers. “Six months.” She grabbed Aimee’s purse and draped it over her arm. “We can talk about it later.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“I didn’t find out.” Betsy pointed at the light indicating the baggage about to appear.

Only after Aimee looked away from the surprise of Betsy’s stomach did she notice the Korean man standing slightly behind Betsy, clasping his hands together and waiting.

“Lee Jun-Soo,” Betsy said, and the man bowed. “He came to see Seoul. He wants you to call him Jay.” At this, Jay nodded in confirmation.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Aimee said, and Jay nodded again, his hands still clasped. As the baggage ran down the conveyer, Aimee looked at her sister and Jay, wanting to ask why he was really there with them, at the airport. Aimee knew he must be somehow important, that he must figure into this strange new life, but Betsy would never just come out and say the things that needed to be said.

After Aimee grabbed her suitcase, she walked behind Betsy and Jay toward the exit, the little luggage wheels keeping rhythm on the grooved white floor. Betsy turned back to face Aimee, round ceiling lights bouncing off the floor and glinting against her necklace, lighting up her face. “Well, happy birthday, then,” Betsy said.

Aimee reached out and gently touched Betsy’s back, which Betsy either didn’t notice or didn’t acknowledge. “Happy birthday,” Aimee said.

She and Betsy were both adopted. They had been adopted two years apart, two ruddy blond girls from separate birth families, but were around the same age. Aimee was adopted as a newborn and then, later, Betsy was adopted at two. Their parents always celebrated their birthdays together and Aimee always thought of her and her sister as twins.

"You actually came," Betsy said, and her voice sounded just like Aimee remembered it, a strained balance of charity and reprimand.

"Of course," Aimee said, though in the days leading up to the trip even she began to doubt she would go through with it. When packing she'd felt panicky, and she questioned what good visiting would even do.

Aimee had come to visit her sister and to celebrate their thirtieth birthdays. That was the reason she owned outright, the reason she admitted to. What she didn't admit was that she hoped to convince Betsy to move home. It didn't seem right that a new decade should start with them living so scattered and apart, just the occasional e-mail between them that didn't say much, if anything at all. Aimee hadn't seen Betsy in two years, not since Betsy had moved to South Korea to teach English after her divorce. The two years felt longer somehow, though, as if time had stretched the distance between them. Aimee had hardly even seen any photos of Betsy from the last few years. Lately, when she'd imagined her sister in Korea, Betsy still appeared twenty in her mind, her body so angular and thin. That was the age Betsy had married Mark, against their parents' wishes, when Mark and Betsy had left her family behind to travel Europe, eventually finding a way to stay and teach English in France. This trip to Korea was Aimee's first experience abroad and Betsy had suggested she stay longer, but a short trip was all that seemed manageable. Aimee didn't want to be away from home.

On the bus to the center of Seoul they passed twenty-story apartment buildings and factories interspersed with small rice fields. The driver wore white gloves and wove between traffic. Seoul was more metal and flash than Aimee had imagined, if she ever imagined it at all. Betsy lived in Gyeongju, a few hours from Seoul in the southeast part of the country. On the train to Gyeongju, the landscape passed like the blurred memory of a recent dream. Along the way, Jay quietly gestured to various things out the window, various towns they were passing, and Betsy announced the name, told Aimee a little about the landscape. Aimee wasn't sure how much English Jay spoke. He seemed to understand everything she and Betsy said, but responded himself with only one or two short phrases. Perhaps he was a man of few words. "See," Jay would insist as he pointed. He kept repeating that. "See."

Betsy lived on the eleventh floor of her apartment building. When Aimee entered at the ground level, there was a pervasive smell of fish. Jay allowed the women to go ahead of him on the elevator, gesturing with his arm, you first.

"You get used to it," Betsy said about the smell.

Right away, Betsy led Aimee over to window in her living room and pointed to the view. "The Taebaek Mountains," she said. "I always wanted to live near mountains." Aimee looked between the sharp and more rolling tree-covered peaks, at the way they faded in the distance—less brightly green, like ghosts standing behind their lush and closely real counterparts.

Betsy's washing machine sat on the enclosed balcony, and she had her laundry strung up in rows drying. Across the courtyard, in another apartment building a woman hung sheets. She

stopped and watched Betsy and Aimee, waiting until they headed inside before she finished her task. Betsy showed Aimee the bathroom: how the shower drained in the center of the room, how you could spray anywhere you wanted with water, standing in the middle of the tile.

"I didn't want to tell you this because I was afraid you wouldn't come, but there is a storm coming." Betsy sprayed a little near Aimee's feet, holding up the showerhead like a weapon.

Aimee jumped back from the spray. "I heard," she said, not betraying her worry.

"It's supposed to be pretty bad." Betsy walked out the bathroom and toward the kitchen. "We'll see."

"What kind of storm?" Aimee asked, but Betsy didn't answer. She got out the kettle and boiled some water for tea on her miniature stove. Betsy's teacups were like little delicate porcelain bowls. Jay, after taking a few sips, excused himself. He closed the door quietly behind him.

"He lives close," Betsy explained. "One day he just started walking over."

"You didn't even know him?" Aimee set her teacup down on the counter with more force than she intended.

Betsy laughed. "No, I knew him. I'd been teaching him English. He'd recently come here from North Korea. We both had so few friends."

"So you became close?"

"It just made sense he would walk over." She twirled her finger in her tea, but said no more.

Mark was a Canadian man Betsy met while waitressing in Toronto, the first place she went after high school. Their elopement coincided with a crisis in Aimee and Betsy's parents' lives. Their parents had begun orbiting each other as sudden strangers in the family's small home. Aimee had never seen this coming. To her, in all her memory, her parents seemed to get along just fine. They went about their marriage in a highly quotidian, but not entirely passionless, way. It seemed incomprehensible that they couldn't work it out. Betsy hadn't been around to see any of this. She was already in Toronto and then off to Europe as a young bride. Aimee, though, felt like she was watching the erosion of some spectacular cliff, time-lapse photography detailing nature's inevitable descent. It was bit by bit, fast and slow all at once, amazing something so seemingly strong could break off and fall right into the sea.

To Aimee it sometimes felt like her family had been purposefully scattered to far-flung locales in order to make up for the years they spent living in close quarters. Growing up, they'd lived in a two-bedroom townhouse in northern Michigan. Their condo had been built for summer travelers, not families, not for working parents and two children.

Aimee's mother had left her father for good three years ago—the year before Betsy's own divorce. Their mom moved into a friend's cabin in Colorado. She'd become a yoga fanatic and planned retreats, jockeying about from ashram to ashram throughout the year. After she left, Betsy and Aimee's father felt he had no reason to stay in Michigan, and he packed up for New York City as if he were in his twenties himself and desperate to live out some big-city dream.

“I’ve always wanted to,” he said when Aimee asked him why on earth he was going.

Occasionally, at home, Aimee would drive by the old family condo. She only lived a couple of blocks away. She would imagine the ways the new family—a summers-only trio consisting of a young couple with a small boy—changed the decoration. They probably tracked sand all over the rug. The boy’s little cars and building blocks were probably scattered on the floor. When Aimee drove by in the winter, the building was dark and shuttered, the snow piled high on the sidewalk.

After Aimee took a nap on Betsy’s thin couch, the sisters went outside to spend time in the warm evening air. They drank pineapple Fanta and sat in folding chairs set up at the edge of the parking lot, facing the mountains.

“Promise me you’ll eat more than rice,” Betsy said. “The food here is delicious.”

“I’ll try it,” Aimee promised. “A woman on the plane said I have to try the kimchi.”

“You do.”

The sun was beginning to set behind the distant high-rise apartment buildings closer to the mountains. Betsy lifted her soda bottle toward the sky. “To your visit.”

Aimee mimicked the action. “I’m finally here.”

Betsy pointed out where she walked most mornings, how lovely it could be in the morning mountain fog.

“So, is Jay the father?” Aimee asked. Raising the question felt awkward, but she didn’t know how else to do it.

Betsy paused before answering. Aimee thought she heard her sigh. “He’s not. Look, we’ll talk about it later.” Betsy finished the last of her soda, shook the empty glass bottle. Aimee asked her to tell her about the storm. “I heard about it on the plane,” she said.

“The worst typhoon the country has seen in a few years,” Betsy said.

“Great time for a visit.” Aimee’s eyes followed a small finch flying toward the mountains.

“It will be fine. We have the whole national park between us and the coast. And we have four days before we even need to worry about it.”

“I’d like to go to the sea,” Aimee said, picturing the empty expanse of park between the city and a coast she could barely imagine. “But not if it’s dangerous.”

“I figured. I thought Jay might take you. You’ll be fine.”

“Jay?” Aimee noticed, the way she often did outside at dusk, that it felt suddenly dark and cold.

“He also loves the water, the sea.” Betsy’s English felt a little stilted as she grew tired, as if she was unused to its daily practice. “As you do,” Betsy said. Aimee hoped the formal quality of their interactions would pass, that they would get used to each other and find an ease she thought she remembered.

Aimee asked Betsy to tell her about Jay, and Betsy explained that she had been tutoring him just over a year, how he was a refugee from North Korea and thirty-eight years old. Some Chinese missionaries had helped him escape to South Korea four years earlier, and he’d been learning English through the volunteer organization Betsy helped with.

"Why is he learning English?"

"He was a doctor in North Korea." Betsy flung her arms up, as if to indicate *elsewhere*. "He had to restart medical school and they use English terms here."

Betsy explained how Jay had trouble adjusting to the twenty-four-hour lights of the city. How he'd gotten used to the blackout darkness of Chongjin, his hometown in North Korea, and how he felt most himself when it was completely black. "He turns off all of the lights in his apartment. He eats dinner in the dark."

Betsy explained how hungry Lee Jay had been as a young man and how he would steal pears to eat. She said he left North Korea one day, without telling any of his family, without even a warning. "He walked to the Tumen River and waited for nighttime, when he thought the guards might be asleep. Then, he just crossed it."

Jay rolled up his pants and felt his shoes sink in the silt bottom. She said it was like he couldn't even think; he just went, and then walked until he found someone who could speak Korean. The man took one look at Jay's skinny, malnourished frame, his flimsy synthetic clothes, and knew where he came from. He brought him to a missionary church that helped people reach South Korea.

"Just like that," Betsy said, describing his disappearance. "Poof." She cupped the empty glass bottle with both of her hands. "He left, and no one could know."

Later, Aimee had trouble falling asleep, her body refusing to adapt to the new time zone. Betsy had made up the couch for her in her living room and the black-fitted sheet was soft and

worn, and Aimee ran her foot over its pilled middle. When she turned, she felt it tear. While trying to fall asleep, she ran her foot over and over that tear.

Wide awake, she got up and walked toward the closed door down the hall that she was told would be the baby's room. She opened the door and saw Betsy had decorated the walls with small canvas paintings of animals on bright-colored backgrounds. Below the cartoon faces of horses and frogs, Betsy had painted the Korean interpretations of their sounds in careful characters. Aimee sat in the rocking chair near the crib. Betsy would have a baby in this place. She would put the baby in a high chair, feed the baby gooey spoonfuls of unfamiliar food. She would rock the baby night after night.

It was difficult to reconcile Betsy's existence in Korea, the new life growing inside of her, with Aimee's own life. Aimee thought she wanted children, but she always thought someday, someday. And she'd gotten used to the idea of living alone, never leaving her small apartment in Michigan. And yet, it didn't seem impossible to want the chaos in which Betsy chose to live. Aimee knew she was jealous, though she couldn't imagine herself living in this place. Betsy belonged, somehow. Aimee never had.

A couple of days later, Aimee was still waking jet-lagged and groggy. The past few afternoons had been full of sight-seeing around Betsy's city in the company of Jay. This morning, as most mornings, Aimee could hear the quiet sounds of Korean and English words drifting from the kitchen. She ambled over in her socks and pajamas toward Jay and Betsy speaking in low voices. Jay wore a collared shirt and pressed slacks. His black hair was slightly long and hung across his forehead. As Aimee approached, she saw Jay's hands on Betsy's

stomach. He removed them and nodded at Aimee when she entered. Betsy handed over a cup of coffee.

"I let you sleep." Betsy took a sip from her own mug. "Will you be ready soon?"

"Yes." Aimee raised the mug in thanks and went to go change.

Jay called after her. "I am coming."

Aimee looked back at him and smiled. "Great." She nodded. She felt like she and Jay were constantly nodding at each other, that there was this frustrating and seemingly impassable boundary between them.

"This country. So beautiful," Jay said, as if he needed to convince Aimee.

"It is. It is." Aimee chided herself for the constant repetition, the saying nothing at all. "I can see that."

In e-mails leading up to the trip, Betsy had told Aimee how Gyeongju was the ancient capital of the Silla empire, which reigned over part of the Korean peninsula for nearly a thousand years. On the tourism website Betsy sent Aimee, they called Gyeongju the "Museum Without Walls." As the seat of the Silla empire, it contained Buddhist temple ruins and tombs. It was surrounded by the lowlands of the Taebaek Mountains and bordered by the Sea of Japan. The city dated back thousands of years and kings were buried there. The Silla people encased their dead rulers in tumuli, or burial mounds, in the center of town. In the e-mails, Betsy had only shared history, but somehow this interaction felt more intimate than their as-yet formal exchanges.

That afternoon, Jay, Betsy, and Aimee took a bus to the tumuli. The hills were deep green and looked like rows of grass bellies, stomachs of earth interred with Silla kings. Betsy told Aimee how the tombs were mostly preserved, left untouched for centuries in the center of the city. There could be plenty of riches inside—jewelry and statues and crowns. Aimee read about what was called the bone rank caste system during the dynasty. Instead of tracing ancestry through bloodlines, the Silla had used a system of sacred bone, bone belonging to those with royal ancestors on both sides of the family, and true bone, bone belonging to other royals, to represent the highest classes.

Betsy walked ahead of them through the grass hills like a guide. “I like to come here and walk between the tombs,” she said.

One of the burial mounds had been excavated and turned into a museum. Inside, there was a cross-section of the tomb, showing layers of wood and stone. Betsy waited outside while Jay and Aimee went in. “I’ve been a million times,” she said. “It’s very hot in there.”

Inside, another American was touring the tumulus, and Aimee found it comforting and disconcerting to hear him speak, to see him point to a map and ask where he could see a particular temple. His voice sounded robotic, his accent exaggerated. She watched him wait until he thought no one was looking and place his hands on the tomb wall.

Lee Jay watched the man as well, and when he saw the man touch the stone, he went over to him. “No,” Jay said, reaching his hand out like he wanted to touch the man’s shirt. “No.” The American raised his arms deferentially, apologizing. Jay looked like he was about to say

something else, but the man was already walking away, out of the museum and back toward open air. “He touched it,” Jay said to Aimee. “I can’t believe his disrespect.”

This was the most Jay had spoken to Aimee so far, and his English was better than she’d thought. It seemed he was becoming more willing to talk to her and that perhaps their shortness with each other up to this point had been a mutual shyness.

“Do you like Gyeongju?” Aimee asked him then as they walked inside the short grass hill.

“Not as much as your sister. She loves it. She doesn’t miss her home. Like I do, maybe,” he said. He looked at Aimee, perhaps realizing this information might be difficult to hear. “I like the market,” he quickly added. “So many foods I’ve never eaten. Bananas, papayas, kiwi.”

“What does my sister like?”

“The history.” He stopped for a moment, thinking. “The mountains. She likes walking around and nobody looks like her.”

“I was hoping to convince her to come back home.”

At this, Jay looked at Aimee and then away at a plaque describing the Silla empire. She thought she saw some terror in his eyes. “I didn’t know she was so happy here,” Aimee said. Betsy was right about the heat in the tomb, and Aimee began to feel short of breath, surrounded by visitors speaking an assortment of languages. She walked out, leaving Jay examining an artifact. Back outside, she passed a Korean mother who grabbed up her child, as if to protect him from Aimee’s urgency. Aimee didn’t see Betsy, and she sat in the grass for a moment, waiting for Betsy and Jay to search for her. At home, whenever she felt panicky and surrounded, she

located herself in relation to the lake. From Gyeongju, Lake Michigan was over 6,500 miles to the east, across the Pacific Ocean.

At home, Aimee lived alone a few blocks away from the family's abandoned condo in a small studio near a grocery store. She lived in the attic apartment of an elderly woman's house and she worked from home copyediting scholarly books and journals. During the day, rising up from a dense manuscript on northeastern African language acquisition, she could hear the woman's soap operas, the way she hummed, the buzzing of her oxygen tank—the dull but loud sound of it rolling over linoleum.

People were often surprised when they learned Aimee and Betsy weren't twins. Betsy was several months older than Aimee, though she joined the family later. Aimee wished she could remember that—gaining a big sister one day, seemingly out of the blue. Their parents told Aimee she wasn't very nice to Betsy at first, that she would reach her toddler hands toward Betsy's face and yank on her skin, pulling at her red cheeks, her nose. It was as though, in their silent baby play, Aimee understood Betsy would be sharing what was hers.

When they got back to the apartment, they saw a neighbor sweeping the front lobby. As they entered, this woman touched Betsy's belly, and Betsy let her rest her hands there before they went inside.

During the following days, Aimee watched for people preparing for the storm. She expected it to be like the news reports she saw of Florida hurricane prep in the States, all of the boarding-up of windows, the gathering of water and cans. To Aimee, there seemed a lack of frenzied stockpiling and arrangements. Betsy waited until two days before the storm to tell

Aimee it was time for Jay to take her to the sea. “Don’t worry, you’ll miss the rains,” Betsy said as she pulled pans out of the cupboard for dinner.

“I don’t want to go,” Aimee said. She thumbed the bottom of her shirt as she sometimes did when she was nervous. “It seems unsafe.”

“Just go,” Betsy said. “It will be good for you.”

It made Aimee furious when Betsy made such proclamations, as if everything Betsy did was right and brave—as if Betsy was the authority on what’s best—but Aimee rarely spoke up about it, even when they were younger. She just wanted Betsy to stay close to her, to be like the inseparably linked twins Aimee always heard about.

The next day, Aimee and Jay took the bus to Jeonson-ri on the coast. It was windy by the beach and Aimee wrapped herself in a sweater of Betsy’s. There wasn’t really sand, just stones, and Aimee took off her shoes to try and dig her feet beneath them. Two white men—tourists, Aimee assumed—ran into the water in their boxers. They darted in and out, the surf splashing against their legs.

At home, Aimee often biked or walked to Lake Michigan. During winter, she would drive, parking as close as she could to the water. She liked to watch the other people who went to the lake at night, or in cold weather. Lots of teenagers would gather there all year long—young boys who ran up as the waves crashed against breakers and girls who’d happily shriek.

Jay stood beside Aimee. Over the course of her trip, she’d gotten so used to his quiet, calming presence, but she always felt like she had no idea what he was thinking, what he made of her in general. “I love the water,” Aimee told him. Why couldn’t she say anything more? Anything of consequence?

“This is the same water,” he said. “East Sea, we call it at home.” Jay looked toward the faraway direction where Aimee assumed Chongjin might be, north. “It has more wind and rocks. They built a fence along the rocks so no one sails away.”

On the beach, a couple in stylish black raincoats followed a toddler picking his way through the stones. They bent, reaching their hands behind him as he walked, ready to grab him if he tripped.

“I hated your sister, you know. At first.”

“You did?”

“I hated all Americans. They tell us to. At home. America is why we have no electricity. This is what they say.”

“There are lots of things to blame Americans for, I suppose.”

“Yes,” Jay said, looking at Aimee. “But different things. Not like I thought.”

They wandered quietly down the shore, the Korean couple ahead of them in the distance. They didn’t stay at the coast very long. When they’d walked as far as either of them wanted to go, they turned back to board the bus toward Betsy’s apartment. When they came in the front door, Betsy spun around, holding a spatula. “Did you two have fun?” she asked and she seemed happy to see them together. A piece of green pepper fell to the floor.

Newscasters were calling the impending weather Typhoon Dianmu. They warned of heavy rains, and they said it might be the worst typhoon in a while, the first to make landfall in Korea in three years. Aimee was comforted that the storm had a name, that it could be

categorized like the labeled hurricanes that happened on other coasts back home. The newscaster explained that “Dianmu” is Chinese for “the goddess governing thunder and lightning.”

That night, after midnight, large drops fell fast and thick. The windowpanes clattered against the building’s frame. Betsy asked Aimee to come into her room, near the smaller window. Jay had gone back to his apartment before the weather started. Betsy and Aimee moved Betsy’s bed to the far side, near the closet, and watched the grayness of the storm outside, heard the steady rain like pouring metal hitting the side of the building, lifting the sound of everything they said and did to a higher and more frenzied register. All of the windows in the building across from them were curtained or shaded. Some people had nailed boards over their balcony doors.

Betsy wrapped her blanket around her shoulders and sat up, leaning against the closet. Aimee knew that if there was a time to talk to Betsy it was now. Aimee knew she should tell Betsy how much she needed her at home, how alone she really felt without their family in Michigan.

Betsy lifted an arm out of her blanket and pointed to a map of France on the wall. “When Mark and I were in France, I took pictures of the coast at Brittany. I was going to give them to you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Betsy laughed, running a palm over her stomach. “Why do I do anything? It made me angry at you a little, that you wouldn’t see it yourself. At the time, I thought you would never leave Michigan, not even to visit.”

“Me neither.”

This was the first time Betsy had mentioned Mark since Aimee arrived, and Aimee had wanted to know what happened between them—why it ended, or why it ever began. Aimee had never had a serious relationship, and she needed to know how it worked for other people, why it never seemed to work for her. All of the men she'd loved had been her friends, only ever her friends. They'd never loved her back in the way she wanted them to. They'd all moved away, too.

"What happened with Mark?"

"The same thing that happened with Mom and Dad," Betsy said. Aimee nodded like she understood.

"The same thing that happened with our real parents, maybe. Who knows?"

When Betsy and Aimee were fifteen, they'd had the expected amount of birth parent curiosity. They did the research and found out Aimee's had divorced and later her father had died. Aimee's mother e-mailed her a few times, but her e-mails made little sense; they spoke of astrology and theories about other worlds, realities. They scared Aimee and made her wish she'd never looked for her parents at all. She never went to see her birth mother, though the woman only lived a state away in Indiana. Betsy's biological mother lived in New Mexico, but she didn't want to be contacted, and Betsy never found much out. Betsy and Aimee also knew only a little about their ancestry—that Aimee was part Irish and Italian; Betsy was Swedish and Greek.

That night, as they watched the rain, Betsy shared more information with Aimee. She told Aimee about pregnancy in Korea. She explained how the Korean men started ignoring her after she started showing, but always gave her a seat on the bus. The older women, the ajumma,

smiled and encouraged her. They gave her advice. Pregnancy seemed more matter-of-fact in South Korea, not like at home. Eat lots of kimchi, the doctor told Betsy during every visit.

"They don't like single mothers here," Betsy said. "I tell people I am married and that my husband is far away. When I became pregnant, I worried they would fire me, so I started telling lies."

"Who is the father?" Aimee asked again.

"An American. His name is Jake. I haven't tried to get a hold of him. I wouldn't even know how."

"When will you come home?"

"I've told Jay he can be the father. He thinks he's the father."

At this, Aimee sat up on her elbow. "I don't understand."

"I mean," she paused, looking at the ceiling. "He knows he's not, technically, but he has no family here, and he wants to help. I've decided to let him."

"But how does that work?"

"I don't know. Our lives have been so different. I just don't expect the things from Jay that I expect from other people. I don't expect the same . . . attachments," she said. "He left everyone behind." Betsy began stretching, trying to touch her knees over her stomach.

"What will you do if you have to leave, if you can't find a new job, or they don't let you stay?"

Betsy laughed in her patronizing way, and she patted Aimee's knee. "You're so practical," she said. "We've talked about that. I think we'll get married. I would get free childcare. I could stay."

Above them, Aimee heard traditional Korean folk music seep through the floor from another apartment. Despite the hammer of rain against glass, she could make out the delicate twang of some kind of string instrument, the light, high notes of a flute.

By lunchtime the next day, the weather let up. Betsy told Aimee what she read in the newspaper: five people had died during the storm, mostly in Seoul, one hundred and thirty homes had been flooded, and seventy-four flights out were canceled. In Gyeongju, the storm had never become quite so threatening; it seemed like an August Michigan thunderstorm, the wind howling in just the same way.

The following morning, the day Aimee was scheduled to leave, many flights and airlines were back on track out of Seoul. Aimee's flight was not delayed. Before Betsy took Aimee to the airport, Aimee called their father in New York. It was dinnertime there, and he sounded tired, like he'd been lying on the couch all day and watching television.

"Holding down the fort?" he asked. He loved to say that. He repeated the question often after he left for New York to Aimee in Michigan, alone. Aimee knew he liked that she remained at home, that he could think of her near the lake. Unlike her father, her mother wanted her to move, leave the state. "You could go anywhere," she often said to Aimee, before adding, "but please don't go to Korea."

"Betsy's pregnant," Aimee told her father on the phone. "She's never coming home."

Aimee's father tapped his fingers on the counter of his New York apartment. "Does your mother know?"

"I don't think so. I don't think anyone does."

On the train ride to the airport, Betsy told Aimee more commonplace things. She told her about grocery shopping and misreading the labels on the cans. She explained the technology in her classroom, how they had a green screen, how it could project her elementary students anywhere, showing them strange and foreign worlds without even leaving school walls. Betsy was more talkative than she'd been all week, like she realized their time together was almost up. Aimee studied her sister closely as she was talking. She didn't know when she would see her again. Aimee didn't know when or if she'd meet this niece or nephew. Despite the fact that she felt they needed more time, that they were finally getting somewhere, breaking through some coldness, Aimee knew she would get on the plane and go back to whatever awaited her. She knew she would end up saying good-bye.

"Are you going to move?" Betsy asked Aimee before they reached Seoul. The train inched along slowly as it pulled into the station. Aimee told her she didn't know, that she was thinking about it. There were so many places she might go. She was free to go. She thought maybe someday it would be possible to vanish and become someone new.

Before Aimee got in the security line at the airport, Betsy gave her a hug and thanked her for visiting. She did not ask her to stay. She did not insist she come visit again. She did not even promise to send pictures of the baby. Aimee was disappointed Betsy gave her so little to hold on to, disappointed that she could not insist on it herself.

On the plane, Aimee proofread a little, trying to distract herself by preparing for regular life. She was not supposed to really read texts while checking them, just allow her eyes to bounce over the words looking for mistakes. Sometimes she couldn't help it, though; she'd get caught up in the story. In one article from a couple of years before, she learned about Kijŏng-dong, the only North Korean village visible from the demilitarized zone. Before she even knew she would visit South Korea or meet Lee Jay, she read about the "Propaganda Village," built to look prosperous in the 1950s and designed to encourage South Korean defectors. People in South Korea studied the village with telescopes and discovered vacant building shells. The facades didn't even have rooms or windowpanes. The place was even emptier than a ghost town because no one had ever lived there at all.

When Aimee reached her hometown, she drove by the old condo and sat there for a moment before going to her apartment. She parked across the street and saw all the lights turned on. They illuminated the front hallway stairs, which were visible through tall, narrow windows flanking the front door. A man walked down the stairs, carrying his small boy in his arms. He walked toward the back of the house.

Aimee turned off the air conditioner for a moment in her car and sat in the heat. There were tears on her face, and she allowed herself to cry, her body sinking and rising with a rare and elemental violence. Aimee would go back to her apartment and sleep, but first she looked at those stairs, made emptier by the man's absence. She would stay in this place, at least for a little while. Aimee remembered how Betsy often used the stairs for exercise. She remembered her running up and down, trying to lose weight before dates and school dances. Aimee listened for that sound now, willing it to appear. She listened for the steady pounding—the running up as if to greet her, the running down as if to flee.

Mankind vs. The Undertaker

Her boyfriend is into U.S. presidents and professional wrestling. He is reading biographies of both occupations and says this helps him to appreciate gray area, decisive action. Lives of great men, he explains.

I'm having a wrestling party, he tells her. We will all be wrestlers for Halloween and you can be Mankind.

Come over tonight, he says. I want to see you seven times this week.

She goes to work and it turns out to be a big day. There is a new toaster oven in the office break room, an extravagant stainless steel Cuisinart. A guy from sales tells her his plans to cook elaborate side dishes during lunch. She nods as if this is brilliant, and he, full of brilliant ideas. The empty box the appliance came in sits on the table and someone, hungry perhaps, has labeled the images of cooking food on the packaging. Greek Chicken it says, with arrows.

She hears Charles, in the adjacent cubicle chewing on toast. He has recently found God. Though he rarely speaks to her, he posts updates about his spiritual development to an online profile that she regularly checks. Today his posts are quite exalted, screaming JESUS and SAVED while he sits with his toast.

She has been at her first job for less than a year. In meetings, she has trouble articulating herself, says *sexful* when she means *successful*. In memos, she has trouble spelling *disappointment* and *rhythm*. She remains nervous and guarded.

In general, she has lots of fears. She worries about the gas smell of her stove, about sharp pains in her chest, the side effects of vaccines. She hates the sound of fireworks, the way she flinches as if slightly hollowed with each blast.

It is like post-traumatic stress, a woman told her, for imagined or future trauma. To this woman,

she thinks, trauma must come strictly in booms and pops.

She recalls meeting her boyfriend's internship coworker a few years before. She remembers, during their introduction, he shook her hand with his left and held a beer with his right. You're twenty? he asked, sticking the beer under her nose. For now, you can smell.

A year after the internship finished, the man blew his face off with a firework. Her boyfriend read in the paper all about his miraculous survival.

During lunch, she walks around the block. She hears a man say insistently into his phone, Everything is *fine*, and a woman say to her friend, That must feel good! Two other women pass her overcome with laughter. One says, in tears, And then the horse died! All the way down the street, they carry on this wheezing, happy fit.

When she returns from lunch, she is tired and full. She rinses a coffee mug in the sink and notices a new sign: *Hand Washing. Not Just for Doctors*. It depicts a cartoon of a man in a surgical mask. He looks responsible, she thinks.

Two men stand near the fridge discussing Phillip, the colleague who was terminated the previous week. We're in a recession, one man sighs.

She nods though she is sick of talking recession. She's also tired of people telling her tomatoes are a fruit. She longs to put her shoulders down, feels they are constantly shrugged. She knows now why people do yoga. She does yoga even though she hates yoga-people with their mats and lotus talk. She doesn't talk about *practicing yoga*, just likes the muscle yield and arch—feeling the back do its work.

Most of her coworkers are older men and she's had trouble connecting. She asks about their kids, their weekends.

She thinks about her one male friend from high school, now out-of-touch, who at

seventeen professed repeatedly he was the wisest man of their generation (in North America). That was his major claim, in addition to his purported frisbee golf prowess. Later, he was one of her first friends to have children.

Your face is like a quarter, he once told her. She thinks now he was right; it's shiny and round. She remembers him laying pictures out on a desk and sticking coins over her face. He wasn't trying to be mean. She remembers him sneaking up from behind while she stood at her locker. She slammed her head into the metal and dropped her books on the floor.

He laughed. You scare so easily, he said.

She remembers, at a high school party, people talking about spooning. She didn't know what it was, assumed it was dirty. What is it? she asked. Lie down, he said and wary, she obliged. Cupping her into him, sideways on the basement carpet, he put his arms around her waist; she felt his chest against her back. Oh, *spoon*. They were surrounded by teenagers holding Solo cups. Helping her up, he asked, You liked that, didn't you? Of course she did.

Within the first several months at her job, three employees had deaths in the family. One put his Parkinson's-afflicted wife in a nursing home at age fifty-five. Would you like to offer your condolences? the receptionist had asked. She signed all the cards.

After work, her parents take her to eat. Thanks for dinner, she says at the end.

Of course. Love you, her mother says.

Her dad, lost in a televised football game, looks over absentmindedly. Of course we would love you, he accidentally says.

On the way to her boyfriend's, she thinks about her father, who believes in divine intervention. He used those exact words on the phone recently after reading a presidential biography borrowed from her boyfriend. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on the 4th

of July, he said.

When she goes into his apartment, her boyfriend is wearing a wig. I'm going to be the Undertaker he tells her, brushing aside the long black hair. He describes the rest of his outfit: black boots, long coat, a bowler hat with a big rim. He shows her his wrestling entrance; he's practiced. Stand over there, he says and he walks toward her painfully slow. He puffs his chest and clenches his fists, his skinny arms held stiff and away from his body.

He puts in a video saying, we have to watch this. It's our epic battle, he says. Mankind vs. The Undertaker. Hell in a Cell. The most infamous match of all time, he says to the screen.

They watch a steel, fenced cage descend from the ceiling, enveloping the ring and surrounding area. There is music and strobe, cheering.

It is custom built for injury, the announcer says.

Her character, Mankind enters the arena, disheveled and drunk-seeming, weaving and carrying a chair. He wears a loose tie, a ripped shirt, boots, and a mask. His hair looks greasy and slept-on.

That's you, her boyfriend says with a slap on the back.

Can you imagine what this human being will do to himself? the announcer asks.

Mankind throws the chair on top and then heaves himself onto the cage. The Undertaker enters in blasts of fire. She recognizes his signature, slow walk and his fists that seem permanently clenched.

Shortly after the match begins, her boyfriend's character throws hers off the sixteen-foot cage. *Oh my God*, an announcer pleas. Somebody get out here.

Don't worry, he gets up, her boyfriend says, patting her leg.

The throw is replayed until the quick thump upon impact feels part of her body.

Once Mankind is back on his feet, the match resumes. She half closes her eyes.

This is when I chokeslam you through the cage, her boyfriend says before Mankind falls again, this time into the ring. Her boyfriend leans over and kisses her on the cheek.

After, he shuts off the TV and turns to her. So you'll do it? he asks, leaning in close to her nose.

You'll be Mankind?

Sure, she says smiling.

When she gets home, she sneaks into her bedroom before her roommate starts talking. She feels guilty, but just wants to sleep. Her roommate tells longwinded stories about eating habits, previous pet names, preferred detergents.

Eventually, she thinks, there will be no roommates, just two wrestlers, beefy in boots. Something will send her careening sixteen feet, or propel her through fence. After, he will draw her in, whisper in her ear. It will be *fine*, he'll say and then *That* must feel good. He will say, And then the horse *died*, and it will be hilarious. They will roll on the floor in hyperventilate breath, in a jumble of laughter and clutch.

None of This

Dill thought the inside of the photo booth had a boiled-egg smell, horrible yet somehow edible. The smell seemed to stem from the thick and velvety curtain, stubborn despite its constant cleaning. And Dill knew it was clean; he took care of the booth. As the booth's technician on hand at weddings, Dill made sure things ran smoothly. He always filled the paper and checked the ink.

"Let's try a test photo," he said to Elise, his girlfriend and the photo booth company's scrapbook hostess. They were nearly finished setting up for the night's wedding and he watched as she let down her hair, wrapped the elastic around her wrist and stepped inside.

"Do something interesting," he said. The camera flashed four times, the light escaping from the curtain in a muffled, persistent strobe.

Dill waited as Elise exited the booth. She looked at him and shrugged, tucking her hands into the long sleeves of her shirt. Their suggested uniform was black and white and she wore a skirt that hit just above her knees with a light, waffle-knit sweater. She was an odd mixture of comfort and elegance.

Dill knew that when people asked about their job, Elise cracked jokes. "We're dabbling in "Til Death Do Us Part," she'd say. They'd been dating six years and Dill felt the usual questions bubbling quietly between them. "Are we too broke to ever get married?" Elise had asked five months before, during the summer. It was terribly hot that day and he remembered they were sitting on the stoop eating popsicles and watching a neighbor girl draw chalk figures on the sidewalk. "Do you think?" she'd asked, tapping his T-shirt with the cherry popsicle and leaving a red smudge on his shoulder.

A man approached them. “Shutter-Click?” he asked. It was the name of the company. It sounded like the man asked “shudder, click?” Like he was inquiring about some shared symptom, some unfortunate and lockjawed malady.

“Yeah” Dill said. “Shu*tt*er-Click.” He annunciated the T’s. “We’ll reopen after dinner.”

The man nodded and, hands in pockets, rocked backward on his heels. “Nice place,” he said. His tux and unchecked excitement all suggested his place in the wedding party. He raised his empty glass in either toast or demonstration. “Off to the bar.”

Dill returned the man’s smile. He pointed his finger like a gun, thumb raised. Nice, he affirmed. This hotel near the airport, pressed into the grizzled outskirts of Chicago, where he and Elise had moved after graduation. This banquet hall—the windowless, wallpapered walls, the oversized paintings of wildlife, the sweating goblets of water.

He and Elise were both twenty-eight. They met at a small Ohio college and had graduated into the Great Recession. Their initial introductions had been near a fridge, the background an intoxicated blur. “Smell my lotion,” Elise had said, sticking her forearm under his nose. “Freeeeesia,” she’d emphasized. She’d closed her eyes and brought her face near his. Both of them, there, sniffing her arm at the party.

It was her worried energy, the way she hit elevator buttons flat-palmed like a child. She had named her cat Effervescent. Ef, Ef! she would call, her shouts sounding like polite, little swears. A few months after they met, she left Ohio to study in London, but they dated anyway. The temporary distance made their fledgling romance seem more exciting somehow, historic almost, like a courtship from a long-lost era.

Dill looked at the printed test photo. He would pocket it as he had saved all of Elise’s tests. They were in a pile at home on his desk underneath his mail, a neat stack of photographic

strips. They had taken some together, the names and wedding dates of couples they didn't know printed on the bottom in fancy script. Alison and John, September 22. Katie and Steve, December 10. It wasn't a secret, his collection, but rather one more thing he didn't tell her. One more thing he didn't come right out and say. In today's photo, Elise had closed her eyes four times, looking peaceful as she stretched her arms the width of the back curtain. Stephanie and Mark, January 18.

From the next room, Dill could hear the moving chairs and forks of the two hundred wedding guests eating beef tenderloin or chicken kiev, getting up to refresh drinks. "Sounds like dinner has started," he announced to her. He found himself making these collegial and obvious declarations. They had been working together for several months and Dill had come to see Elise newly as a partner—in a professional sense, like two police officers, or lawyers in a firm.

After the meal, he knew they would attend to the line; they'd offer up wigs, captain's hats, oversized sunglasses. "Stand all the way back," Dill would say. "Look into the camera. There will be four photos, two copies. One for you, one for the happy couple. Elise would take over: "Do you want to sign a message?" With the photo strip pasted into the scrapbook, people would write: *Best Wishes. We love you. Years of Happiness.*

Dill always felt slightly guilty, paging through these scrapbooks of happy notes and congrats never meant for him. "Your special night," people said, but he couldn't see it. At the end of the evening, he had even felt true melancholy in the stripping of linen, the empty uncovered chairs, the abandoned cocktails. Those thin little straws. It all reminded him of the strange and lonely feeling he'd gotten as a child looking at the family Christmas tree at night; its lights off.

For the most part, the rest of the night was pleasant, if always the same. The guests began happy and polite—bounding kids in socks, the floating proud parents, the uncles who kept to themselves, nursing a drink to the side. And Dill didn't even mind—he understood—that point when the switch flipped, when he noticed the glassy sheen to people's eyes, the increased hugging, the minor hallway dramas. At a recent wedding he'd seen a bridesmaid crouched into her powder blue dress, her head in her lap, curls untucked and loose by her face. Dill had helped her up. "You're okay," he'd told her, later regretting it. Maybe she wasn't. He didn't know her at all.

Elise continued to arrange the scrapbook table by shuffling sheets of decorative paper into neat piles. Her thin bracelets moved up and down her arm. She'd worn them since they met and such continuity helped Dill still sometimes feel they were both twenty-one—when Elise was in London and their transatlantic calls, those now-cherished conversations, had made him feel enlivened yet encased, a surprisingly safe deepening, a bizarre and welcome sensation of closeness. "I just feel you're on my side," Elise had said. "Maybe that's stupid. Or cheesy." But Dill had felt this animation, foreign words pouring from his mouth. "I can't wait till you get back."

Elise shook her hand until the bracelets fell off and set them next to her like one more flourish to paste in the book. "Have you seen the bride and groom?" she asked Dill. She gathered fake jewels and placed them into bowls. She grasped some in her palm and let them fall through her fingers and into a bowl like hourglass sand.

"Just briefly," Dill said. "They're young,"

"Younger than us?"

"Yes," he replied. "Younger than us."

Just then, the groom exited the reception hall, laughing with friends, appearing as if summoned. He seemed to drift toward them in a happy daze.

Elise sat up straight, a slight gasp audibly catching in her throat. "Identical," she said as the groom passed en route to the bathroom, pausing to chat with a young couple across the hall.

Dill looked at her, waiting for explanation.

"Sorry to bring this up," she said. "But Dill." She paused. "He looks like Chad." She patted her hand on the table.

Dill tried to study the groom's face. He did bear resemblance to his younger brother, but in a way that would've passed unnoticed had Elise not pointed it out. The man had curly, sandy hair, the kind that was always a little unruly and resistant to formal events, and his face looked too young for his body. It had a naïve innocence, a dopey demeanor of friendliness and ease.

Dill didn't want to think about his brother. He found it difficult to picture Chad at their childhood home in Ohio where he struggled to remember words, needed help buttoning his shirt. They were four years apart, but each year Chad seemed younger and farther away. After Chad's near-fatal CDI incident ("combined drug intoxication," the doctor had said, not overdose), Dill learned that Chad had been using heroin for a year.

At the time, Dill had been a senior in college in Ohio and felt he had a handle on personality, on his own particular sequence of traits. He had never before been angry by nature, but since Chad's hospital stay he'd sometimes become gripped in a terrible, racing rage. It was nonspecific; not even directed at Chad or his friends. It just was. It could fill his body with a crisp heat so that he was no longer himself—"risk-averse" someone had once clinically said of him. He was surprised at how predictable he was, how his anger gave him a newfound longing

for activity, how Chad's recklessness might lead him to his own. He envisioned himself getting in a fight, or buying a motorcycle. Such thoughts made him laugh, but there they were. This was totally unlike him; he preferred things rational and organized. They needed to matter on his terms. He was a person of limits, and terms.

Dill never acted on his new impulses. But he'd tried to express them to Elise, standing in his kitchen once all brawl-ready and restless. "I just need to blow off steam," he'd said after getting back from a hospital visit. He saw how she struggled to respond, but he couldn't help this anger. At the time she'd only been back from London a week and she couldn't share this. She had missed everything important. She blurted out nervous, disconnected sentences. "I'm sorry," she'd said. She'd grabbed his face, pushed his cheeks like chubby bunny. "I don't know what to do." She released her hands. "We can talk about it." Her speech was restless. "Let's go for a walk."

"Doesn't it look like him?" Elise repeated, still staring in the direction the groom had finally gone.

"Yes," Dill admitted. He did.

"How is he doing?" Elise asked, not meeting Dill's eyes.

"His neurons are healing," Dill said. His response was his mother's, parroted from her phone-reported updates. She was the one who could best understand Chad's garbled speech. She drove him to his many physical therapy appointments and assured the family of progress; she broke down the learning of movements and skills.

Lately, Elise had been bringing Chad up in conversation more often. In the years since the incident, she'd mostly let it be, hoping, he knew, that he would eventually confide, explain.

But that was just it, he couldn't. All he knew was that she didn't understand. It wasn't her fault, she just never knew the family—the Chad—that existed his mind. The one he couldn't wipe away and start anew.

"Fine," Elise responded, apparently unsatisfied with Dill's answer. "I should be able to say his name." Red-cheeked, she rifled through a basket of stickers, setting aside festive wedding messages about how love is a journey and this moment must be cherished. She handed Dill a paper stamp.

"Not much has changed since Thanksgiving. You saw," he said. He began to punch orange and green flowers—the bride's colors—from cardstock. Elise affixed a tiny plastic diamond to the center of each one. Bending in close to the table, she pressed gems into the paper with her middle finger, nudging them in place. She was careful and precise.

A short, elderly woman in a green, sequined, floor-length gown walked up to the table where they sat. Her dress had sleeves and it looked like she was draped in mermaid scales, some mystical and shining creature emerging to banquet. Her hair was white and set into a curled, stiff pile—a style he had only seen on older women. He had trouble picturing this woman young.

Despite that, there was vibrancy to her—a sheen to her skin that made the dress seem a natural extension of self.

"I'm the grandmother," the woman said. She paused and Dill nodded.

"Is it open?" she asked, gesturing her emerald arm toward the booth. She looked at Dill like he'd already disappointed her.

"Sure," Dill said, guiding her behind the curtain.

After the camera flashed the fourth and final photo, the woman exited and began to walk away.

"Ma'am," Dill called out. The etiquette felt odd in his mouth like lines from a school play.

Elise rushed up to the woman, took her arm and led her to the booth. "It will be just a second until it prints," she said. It was how she might talk to a child.

The woman didn't respond, but allowed herself to be retrieved. The printer jerked and chugged as the photos inched out. Dill grabbed the finished photos from the printer.

"Do you want to sign the scrapbook beside your photo?" Dill asked. "Any words for the bride and groom?"

"No," the woman said simply. She examined her sleeve and pushed a stray sequin into place. "Okay," she said. She bent over the table, her sleeve leaving sparkle on the page. In shaky script she wrote, "I was married for sixty years." She looked up at Dill and Elise. "I lead by example," she explained. She pursed her lips into a small knot.

"Here's your copy." Dill handed her the strip of photos. She took it from him and held it like a wet rag, away from her body. "It's dry," he assured her.

The woman turned and walked back inside the hall. All the while, she held the photo strip at a distance from her dress. Dill could hear the DJ in the next room announcing dances, names. Asking the bride's father to report to the floor.

Dill handed a copy of the woman's series of severe and unsmiling photos to Elise, who pasted it in the book above her message. Elise picked out a sticker to place on the page. Family memories last a lifetime, it said, the message inside of a heart.

Dill thought the grandmother would dislike that sentiment. She'd been so practical with her advice. When Chad was at the hospital, and Elise just back from London, such maudlin phrases that once held any meaning to Dill were lost. He detested hearts and flowers, forced

cheer, people who claimed to be there for him, whatever that meant. Even Elise was lumped into a category of outsiders, their gestures of comfort awkward and trite. The black-haired and bleached teenagers—Chad's "friends"—brought lots of cards and he remembered one*: During difficult times, HUG!* A smiling golden sun embraced itself with white-gloved hands. Dill didn't know these strangers in dark makeup who cried, who folded themselves into each other on the waiting room couch. He had stared at them, knowing none of their names. "Most of them probably do drugs," his mother had said, surveying the sleeping, crying bodies draped over couches and chairs. She later discovered one young woman—who spent an hour next to comatose Chad, holding his hand—had never met him. The girl was a friend of a friend. His mother had stormed into the waiting room, Dill behind her like backup at the scene. "GET OUT," she'd yelled, her voice thick and gritty, emerging from some terrified rage. "Everyone OUT. Family only," she'd yelled. It was good to hear her yell. Dill, too, had things to say. This is not yours, he'd wanted to announce. None of this belongs to *you*.

Elise, done with scrapbook preparations, hastily looped her hair into a messy arrangement approximating a braid. An after-dinner line formed once people had completed the sequence of planned dances—father-daughter, mother-son, the first dance. Feathers from boas became strewn about as the guests rifled through prop bins. Dill saw a red one stuck to the back of Elise's thigh as she handed gel pens to bridesmaids and peered over a flower girl. The girl's elbows were akimbo on the table as she stretched up to see the book, to slowly write her name while her tongue wedged through her mouth in deep concentration. Rebecca, she spelled with a backwards R.

A couple of older kids, a slightly tubby boy and a girl in glasses who both looked around eleven, rotated through the line several times in a row. They got right back into place when they were finished.

"We're going to try every prop," the boy said, some kind of chocolate stuck to the crease of his mouth. "We're the smartest people here." Dill wasn't sure what that meant, but the overconfidence was Chad—this need to assert and ability to annoy. Elise, of course, wouldn't see that. It was the fact that she couldn't possibly know that bothered him.

"Dill," Chad had once said. "You'll never feel this way again." Pointing straight at Dill, cereal spoon in hand and only seven years old he'd said this and then shrugged when Dill asked him what he meant. They were sitting at the kitchen counter on stools, swinging away then back in toward each other. It was breakfast and Dill's first day of junior high. Back then, it seems Chad had had a way of sensing the edge. But they'd both been seniors—Dill in college and Chad in high school—when Dill got the call. Chad. Hospital. Dill couldn't remember that hour-long drive through Ohio.

Dill didn't know what happened. He hadn't known about the heroin at all. There had to be a cause, that's what people seemed to say, but Dill couldn't place anything. In the three years he'd been away from home, nothing visible had changed. Good parents, good town.

"The kids snort it now," the doctor had said.

Heroin had always seemed inconceivably far away, as inaccessible as moon rock. He'd seen the seemingly inapplicable public service announcement so many times in high school—the older, unshowered junkie, his face prematurely wrinkled and haggard next to discarded needles;

the jump forward to his withdrawal, sweaty and fetal around a toilet, convulsing into the porcelain. Dill remembered watching this before third period math.

The photo line died down as people migrated toward the dance floor. Elise's braid sagged and wisps of brown hair hung by her face. The music had changed from wedding classics to wordless, rhythmic beats. Dill imagined Chad at his concerts, meeting up with friends he met online—that's how he met the heroin kid. "The heroin kid" was what his family was calling the kid who first gave him the drug, who, scared, left Chad in a puddle of vomit in his basement before calling the ambulance. The kid who showed up at the hospital a few days later. Dill remembered his father going out to speak with him, to tell the kid he was never welcome near them again. When his father came back, he crumpled into a chair next to Chad, across the bed from his mother, who slept with her head bent toward her chest. If only Dill could've folded them both up even smaller, tucked them away all tightly secure. The perfect wrapped way he always felt growing up.

Dill stood up. "You watch the booth," he told Elise as if they were guards or gatekeepers. A drunk wedding guest stumbled past him into the hallway. The man held his drink in front of him like it was leading the way through his pitches and stumbles. Dill was going to the dance floor in search of their missing props, the masks and glasses. Someone could always be found dancing with a stolen feather boa or a Michael Jackson glove.

The crowd had thinned in the reception room and most people were on the dance floor. The DJ was playing a particularly frenetic song, the up and down felt inconsistent and off. Dill spotted a fake mustache to collect. It was surrendered without a fight. In making his way back,

someone bumped him. Turning, he saw it was the groom. The young man was dancing by himself, jumping and head banging. He moved faster than the music.

The jerky movements were seizure-like and for a moment, Dill filled with concern. Once, when Chad was a toddler, he'd had a seizure and Dill had seen his tiny shaking limbs, the rolling baby eyes. His parents had surrounded Chad on the floor, the phone cord stretching as his Mom followed a paramedic's instructions. There was terror, but also this cooperative jolt toward response. "Go to the window Dill," his mother had said. "Go watch for the ambulance." Dill had focused. In the end, it had been a one-time thing, a fluke; they never found out the cause. Chad had never seized again, but the day was still there; he could see it and he could see Chad the night of that party. Jerking up vomit and breathing it back in. Some pictures stayed in his mind and he wouldn't let them out. "Tell me about Chad," Elise had often said to him, but he didn't want to just tell her stories.

When Dill returned, Elise was pasting a shot of the bride and groom on the first page of the book. "Be right back," she said after patting it in place. "Water." She touched her throat. After she walked away, Dill started unplugging the printer. As he was setting down cords, a man approached him holding a sleeping child. The boy looked to be three or four. He wore a vest and shiny black oxfords, his brown hair sweaty and clumped into curls. The boy's full cheek was pushed pudgy against the man's shoulder, his black shoelaces and drooping feet hung limp, full of weight.

The man, struggling to free a forearm, pointed at the booth. "Open?" he whispered.

Dill nodded. He took a minute to plug in the printer and then waved the man inside.

When the man exited the booth, he gently bounced the sleeping boy up and down. When the photos were printed, Dill handed one to the man, who mouthed his thanks before walking away.

Dill looked at the photo strip. In each, the man had faced a different way, turning compass-like, as if mapping the cardinal directions. In one, the sleeping boy faced the camera; in another, the man did. The last photo showed the back of both of their heads, the man's scalp skin poking slightly through the balding center of his hair. Dill glued it to the final page of the book.

Dill considered the pasted photo for a moment. Looking up, he watched as Elise returned to the table, scratching at her elbow. He thought of that summer day and eating popsicles and how after the little girl went inside, they'd walked over to her surprisingly violent chalk illustrations. In one, the girl had rendered a stick figure bursting out of the belly of a teddy bear. Next to that, the she'd drawn a face with tears. After looking at a while, Elise had crouched down. She'd picked up a piece of discarded, pink chalk and drew smiley faces around the bear. "To cheer her up," she'd explained.

When Elise got back to the table, she silently placed blank scrapbook pages into an envelope. She looked at her watch.

A few minutes later, after Dill had dismantled the camera and put it in its bag, a group of young guests burst out of the reception hall.

"Photo booth!" one yelled.

"Sorry guys, we're closed," Dill said.

"That blows," one girl said, in a shaky warble-like outburst, as if caught mid-hiccup. A guy, his arm wrapped around her waist, gave Dill a friendly wave.

"You should come party with us Photo Booth Guy. Bring your girlfriend."

"I don't think so," Dill said, continuing to pack up, rolling cords into neat bundles. "Thanks," he added.

"Well, if you change your mind, we're in 342," the man said to Elise. "It's going to be a real hotel party."

"Like in a music video," his girlfriend added, stumbling a little, tugging on the young man's suit coat for balance.

The group walked unsteadily toward the elevators. Dill heard Elise laugh next to him. It was a full, throaty laugh, bigger than the episode warranted. For a moment, after her laughter subsided, Elise lay down on the patterned carpet and put her hands over her eyes. "Time to go," she said, looking up at Dill. Little scrapbook flowers stuck to her hair.

They quickly packed the rest of the gear into black canvas bags and hauled them out to the car. They let out bursts of cold-air breath as they lugged the heavy equipment.

Dill had wanted one last glimpse of the groom before he left, but didn't see him. He had that last image of him dancing, the violent, ungainly flailing of his limbs. He knew, reviewing Elise's test photo later, the one tucked safely in his pocket, that he would look at the couple's names printed below and half expect to see Chad's. The last time Dill had seen him was during his trip home for Thanksgiving. Chad had eaten countless pieces of jumbo shrimp and, humming to himself, put discarded tail after tail back in the bowl. Nobody said a word; they had just eaten around him.

Elise climbed into the passenger seat; all of the gear piled in the back. She leaned her head against the side. Dill opened his window, feeling strangely warm, quietly panicked.

After some silence Elise said, “I know they’re cheesy. Weddings,” she explained. She exhaled this admission, like it took a lot out of her. “The chicken dance, the DJ.”

“The toasts, colors, flowers,” Dill said.

Elise nodded. “Okay, everything.” She reached for a bar near her feet and moved back her chair. “But,” she said loudly, punctuating the T, the entire word a bulky force hanging in her mouth. “Let me ask you something.” She put on her devil’s advocate face, a smug, full, lower lip. “What’s wrong with tradition?” With her voice appropriately righteous, she went on. “What’s wrong with one room of—well, of everything, everyone?”

Dill didn’t respond right away. “I’m serious, Dill,” she said. She wrapped her arms around herself, still cold. “I can be so serious.”

Dill carefully pulled onto the street, the highway. He adjusted his mirror. The wind whipped into the car. Dill saw this room, how it was only the invited, that there might always be two Chads, a sad before and after. “There’s nothing wrong with that,” he said.

Before he closed the window, Dill grit his jaw into a forced smile and he didn’t stop until he felt the nerves prickle in his teeth. There was so much he couldn’t seem to claim and it all fell through him like sand. Driving faster, all the old clichés showered him like a downpour of Valentine’s candy—he could almost hear them drumming his windshield like hail. And there was one phrase in particular; it was as if he could see it stuck there in front of him waiting to be shouted, whispered, or somehow made audible. Be mine, he wanted to say. He chose to be this angry. Mine, mine, mine.

The Harshest Landscape We Know

January 24, 1983

Dear Robert Falcon Scott,

I often imagine your reaction when you received Roald Amundsens's telegraph: *Beg leave inform you proceeding Antarctic. Amundsen.* And just like that you were in a race for the pole. How concise news can be. I never pictured the South Pole as an actual place, but I've learned it is located on a plateau beyond the sharp points of the Transantarctic Mountains.

My husband Seth used to talk about the site of your expedition as a distant abstraction. He would say that his father, whom he hadn't seen for years, was as far away as the South Pole. *That's how it feels*, he once said. Another abstraction, of course.

I should stop and apologize. I should not write to the dead. But ever since Seth died, I can only reach toward people who are not here. I hope you understand.

There is so much I can never learn from you, Mr. Scott. Here is what I know of your story. Amundsen beat you to the pole. In 1911, you'd been working toward your trip for twelve years since you were appointed leader of the British National Antarctic Expedition. You had Siberian-bred ponies instead of sled dogs, and you had to wait until Antarctic spring—in November—because you worried about the ponies freezing. As your group trekked south, you slaughtered them for meat. Four men would make the last leg of the journey with you, all of you dragging your gear in sleds and sleeping through the cold nights in reindeer skins, huddled in a tent.

My daughter is almost two and she plays in the other room as I write you this. Outside, the snow keeps falling and I can scarcely believe it is the same winter it was at Christmas, when Seth died. Years have passed, it seems. The doctor who prescribed me sleeping pills told me it

was normal to feel this way. Sometimes, I look at the calendar, and count the days one by one, back to 1982.

Paige, my strange and wonderful daughter, has blonde hair and freckles and right now, she sits by the sleeping, shaggy retriever we have—Toby—and piles blocks on him until they fall down. They always fall down. With every dog breath Toby takes, they fall down. Paige is able to focus more on tasks like this lately. She stares so intently and scrunches her eyes as if she can will the blocks to stay where they are.

Paige and I both stay where we are lately. I tell her we are like the animals in winter tucked beneath the snow. When we did go outside more, in December, I would tell Paige to put her mittened hand up to her ear and bend near the icy drifts. "Can you hear them breathing?" I would ask her. She would narrow her eyes at me (always say yes.

You roamed, Mr. Scott. My husband's father was an explorer of sorts, too. I never used to wonder what makes me different. I live so close to where I grew up. I have never felt the need to travel, or leave.

You failed, Mr. Scott. That's what people say. There is historical speculation. Did you know that? Did you lead your team into certain death and devastation? Was it a lack of preparation? But you'd explored Antarctica before. In 1902, you traveled with Ernest Shackleton and went farther south than any group yet had.

When I look at maps, I trace my finger along your route, and Amundsen's route, stopping at the Bay of Whales, wondering at the sites you'd seen. Shackleton named the bay in 1908 because of all the whales that could be seen from the shore. I read there are fifteen kinds known to live in Antarctica for part of the year. When Paige was first born, Seth and I decorated her room in whales. Cartoon whales with little plumes of water, a rubber ducky floating on the spray

of water. Seth marveled at the silly, playful, impossibilities that we surround children with. We want them to live in these worlds that can never exist. I remember Seth remarking on the strangeness while spackling glue and patting down the wallpaper border. We were both only twenty—so young to have a child and yet near giddy at the surprise of this life we shared.

These days, I stay cooped up inside with my Paige. We watch the snow fall and fall outside. My sister Erin calls and she wants us to come see her, to make the trip to the other side of town where she lives in student housing. “It will be good for you both,” she says.

We live in East Lansing, Michigan, Mr. Scott, a place you never went. Other explorers went here, but much earlier than you. You were an explorer of the twentieth century. You went after the few unmapped lands we had left. Erin studies history at Michigan State University and she tells me about the history of exploration. She is the one who first mentioned you to me a couple of weeks ago. She learned about you in class.

On your expedition, your men grew excited near the pole because there was no sign of Amundsen. He, however, traveled light and fast and was already nearly back at the Bay of Whales by the time you reached your destination. There is a photo of your team outside Amundsen’s tent bearing the Norwegian flag. I study it for signs of disappointment. I showed Paige your photo and she said you looked very cold. “They need snow pants,” she said, as I always clip her into her insulated purple overalls before we go outside.

When you returned to the coast, you had to climb down the Transantarctic Mountains, hike over the Beardmore Glacier. That’s when Edgar Evans fell into an ice crevasse and died fifteen days later. You trudged on with Edward Wilson, Lawrence Oates, and Henry Bowers, hiking on the Barrier—400 miles of sea ice between your team and Camp Evans on Ross Island. Then, the cold spell deepened, reaching forty below for long, unbearable stretches. During a

blizzard, your team all holed up, Oates, who had been struggling with frostbitten feet, walked out into the snow and never came back. The last thing he said to you: *I am just going outside and may be some time*.

What made you want to go to the very bottom of the earth?

Fifteen days later, you died alongside Bowers and Wilson, just eleven miles shy of a depot with supplies. In the end, it was frostbite and hypothermia. You were hungry. Your last journal read, *For God's sake look after our people*.

When I read books about you from the library in town, I find little outside of your career and death. I want to know about your family.

One thing you must not know about exploration—men walked on the moon when I was nine years old. I watched the broadcast with my sister. When they took those first steps, Erin grabbed my arm and pinched me. She's always had a way of marking the momentous.

I don't think you failed, Mr. Scott. You walked to the bottom of this world and, for a little while, you walked back out.

Sincerely,

Kate Watts

February 11, 1983

Dear Rebecca Smith,

Last year, you were found frozen in New York City. The title of the newspaper article said: *One of City's Homeless Goes Home—In Death*. I wanted to tell you that I found this headline disrespectful, Mrs. Smith. The article does go on to detail how you ended up in such a predicament and who you belonged to. I was glad to read about the people out there missing you.

When you were found in your cardboard shack on 10th Avenue, no one knew immediately who you were. You had no address. No identification. But people were looking for you. They were watching for word of your whereabouts. Your nephew heard news of you on the radio. You were identified—a Virginian woman estranged from her family. They say you were beautiful. I hate to read the parts of the article that judge your appearance as if it means something to say you had beauty and that it had faded.

You had a husband and a daughter once. You left them after you were diagnosed with schizophrenia, after you were released from a mental institution. They say you believed you had marks on your face after shock therapy, that you covered these invisible tracks in the heaviest makeup.

I have a daughter and lately she looks at me and asks me questions I will never be able to answer. I hate to be her dose of reality, but she wants too much of me. Always, she is coming into my bedroom to ask me questions and I can't play and pretend like I used to. Paige wants her stuffed animals to wake up at night; she wants to run out into the snow with no clothes on. She wants to bring the dead to life. She doesn't understand the dead and I try to explain what happened to you. I try to show there are other people out there who don't come back and there are those who miss them.

For ten days, people from the Human Resources Administration tried to relocate you to a hospital or a city shelter. You refused to be confined. Your daughter explained how you wanted your freedom. I learned more about you, Mrs. Smith. You had twelve siblings and you went to college. You were the valedictorian at Hampton Institute. You played piano. For a while, after leaving your family, you lived with your sister. Then, eleven years ago, you decided to go it alone, to take care of yourself. Your daughter sent you money, but often you lost it. She wanted you to see a doctor, get more help, but you lost your public assistance because you refused medical examination. You have two grandchildren. Did you meet them before you died? Your daughter made sure your coffin didn't have a latch. She said she would never lock her mother up.

You began having nightmares, the article said. What were they? What happened, Mrs. Smith, when you closed your eyes?

These days, I can't sleep much. The doctor has prescribed pills, but I don't always take them. But Erin says to take those instead of drinking. Seth and I would always celebrate good news by toasting a gin and tonic. The piney, sharp carbonation is a comforting reminder now. Erin doesn't understand.

I have a sister too, like you, and she also helps me. We help each other and she says I can't hide away forever. She brings our groceries each week. She brings me books. Sometimes, though, Paige and I go just to the edge of the driveway. I bundle us up in all our heaviest clothing. We wear ski masks and down coats and mittens and hats and snow pants. We quickly turn around when the first gust of wind brushes my neck.

Kind Regards,

Kate Watts

March 1, 1983

Dear Kathleen Moyers,

You were an acquaintance of my mother's and you died in Ohio five years ago, in the Great Blizzard of 1978. I couldn't find much beyond your obituary. My mother mentioned you after what happened to Seth. She'd cut it from the paper and saved it and she left it on the kitchen counter for me to have.

"Do you remember that blizzard?" she asked me while folding my laundry. Lately she and Erin have been coming over to help me with chores. "Do you remember how cold that winter was?"

"Of course," I told her. I was eighteen at the time of the blizzards and about to graduate from high school that spring. I slept at a friend's house and got stuck there during the snow. I remember feeling like a voyeur—temporarily stuck in another life.

My mother had few details about you, Kathleen. She said you met when my father and your husband were working together at Chrysler in Detroit. She said you'd lost touch by the time you died. My mother described the photos of the snowstorm—the drifts nearly up to the tops of power poles and rooflines, the rows of buried, stranded cars. Your car was outside of Cleveland when you were found. You did have a family, but my mother knew little about them. You had kids around my age and a bit older. You had one grandson.

By telling me about you, Kathleen, my mother could try to connect. I know people don't know what to say to me. They know I don't want to leave my house and they come over and tiptoe around and try not to do or say anything upsetting. Erin brings me lots of books and old magazines so I can do my research. I know she spends late hours in the library when she should

be working on papers for school. She takes careful notes on newspaper articles, scrolling through the microfiche. Everyone is trying to be so helpful.

I'm going to tell you something, Kathleen. I suspect I always loved Seth more than he loved me, that perhaps I was always a bit more certain that what we had was right. Since I'm only twenty-three, I guess I'll love again and then I can compare that to this love. Maybe levels of love are always different. With Seth, though, it didn't matter, because he eventually caught up to me. Seth liked our quiet life in Michigan just as much as I did—our small house and garden, our beautiful girl.

It was the search for his father that made Seth want to leave and find more. He'd been gone in the Upper Peninsula the whole month of December tracking his dad as if the man were some injured animal in the snow. Theo was a natural wanderer, you see. He was a meteorologist, but he up and quit one day when Seth was six. He left his family and his job; Seth never heard from him again. I'd like to blame everything on Theo.

This is a lot of information about me to tell you, Kathleen, but I wish I knew more about you. There weren't many articles in the library that Erin could find about your death and my mother was short on information. In the cold snap of '78, lots of people froze in their cars like you did. The weather the day before you died was relatively mild, but then that night the barometric pressure began to rapidly drop. People began stocking for disaster, preparing for the worst. Maybe you didn't do that and were heading out to grab some food for your family. It had been a cold winter, and perhaps, like others, you thought this snow would be more of the same—a nuisance, not a danger.

I read that the snow fell fast, accompanied by brutal winds. It didn't fall in fat, wet snowflakes, but felt more like sand on the skin; it was horizontal and grainy and sharp.

The term *freezing to death* isn't very accurate, though, I've learned. I've read about the differences between frostbite and hypothermia. Frostbite starts in the extremities—killing tissue, allowing death to move through the body by beginning with skin. Hypothermia killed you by lowering your body's internal temperature. You shivered and became tired and slow when your body temperature dropped even four degrees. At 93 degrees, you began to experience deeper confusion, amnesia. When you reached 90 degrees, you no longer cared about yourself or your fate. If you did move, you would have staggered through the air, unable to coordinate your own failing body. At 90 degrees, everything cascaded and began shutting down. Even your heart slowed; your blood thickened as it flowed and failed in your body. You hallucinated. Maybe you thought you heard music or smelled someone cooking dinner nearby. Near the end, your skin burned due to the burst of blood sent from deep within the body to warm your limbs.

Why were you trapped there on that side street a few miles from your house, Kathleen? Did you consider setting out and braving the dry snow and wind and drifts toward the warm light of home?

Best,

Kate Watts

March 15, 1983

Dear Willie Watts,

We have the same last name, though as far as I know we're not related. I get very sad thinking about your death in 1955, as you were only sixteen. You were part of a trip to Banff with the Wilderness Club of Philadelphia. You made the road trip from Pennsylvania in a station wagon and an old hearse with twenty-one other boys from ages twelve to sixteen. There were two supervisors with you in their late twenties and early thirties. William Oeser, one of the leaders, was a teacher from Baltimore who was afraid of heights.

Of all six boys who died on that trip, only you have my last name. So I've decided to write to you. I saw a letter to the editor from your older sister's boyfriend asking for more details on the event. What really happened and who was to blame?

You boys set out to climb 11,636-foot Mount Temple and the only one of you with any climbing experience was your friend Tony. With his family, he'd done some guided climbs while on vacation in the Alps. You were wearing jeans and a windbreaker and you had on baseball cleats; your friends had running shoes with crampons. Your group brought with you one ice axe, a topo map, two ropes, and a basic travel guidebook.

You began climbing the southwest face of Mount Temple around 11:00 a.m. and your group stopped for lunch just after cresting the snowline. Six of the boys stayed behind there and Oeser put you and Tony in charge of the group because you were the oldest. At 4:00 p.m., at around 10,000 feet, the group rested on a snowpack. The late afternoon sun was warming everything around you and Tony, concerned, pointed out an avalanche in the distance. The eleven of you stopped on a snow bridge that ran over a stream and roped yourselves together.

“For practice,” you said. Rather than roping yourselves in multiple groups, you roped all eleven of you in one long line. You were the anchor and Tony was in front with his axe.

Before the avalanche, you heard the sound of it swishing, approaching. Tony’s ice axe saved him, but the rope broke below him, sending the line of you boys tumbling with the snow. One boy, Peter, felt the rope tighten around his neck and was able to pull it off, saving himself.

Your friend Tony survived and when the snow left everything quiet, he began to search for all of you. He pulled one person out of the snow by a shoe. The sky darkened as night came on and it began to send down a slight rain as Tony searched. Peter headed down for help. Oeser, from farther down the mountain, heard the calls for help, and headed up, sending the boys for more rescuers. He, too, started digging.

The advance team of rescuers climbed out to the location of the avalanche. At this point, after thirty minutes, your survival was highly unlikely. They found a couple of injured boys trying to make their way down the mountain. Using flashlights, they found you at 11:00 p.m. still roped to the others. You survived the avalanche, but died of hypothermia. Your body was carried down the mountain on a pack horse in the dark, a line of rescuers and their flashlights trailing their way down Mount Temple. Your leader, Oeser, was so upset by the deaths—yours and the other five boys’—that he threatened to kill himself and needed sedation. Afterwards, there was an inquest, and the survivors all testified, but the newspaper accounts are muddled and difficult to read. The boys’ story changed; their memory was altered from all they’d seen and couldn’t piece together.

You would be forty-four years old now, if you were alive.

Sincerely,

Kate Watts

April 28, 1983

Dear Seth,

It is spring now. Everything looks completely different than it did in December. It was a particularly cold winter. December especially—they are saying 70% of the month was colder than average across the country. We'd gotten so used to mild Christmases. But even down here it was covered in white snow.

Seth, I've been reading about others who froze to death. People think of it so simply, if they think of it at all. But it can happen so many ways—death by exposure. That's what they call it. I read about a group of boys who died in an avalanche. I learned about polar explorers who died in the harshest landscape we know. I read about the record-breaking blizzards of '78, which was right before we met. What were you doing then? You were living in Traverse City and the snow drifts would have piled high and the temperatures dropped, but that time you were tucked safely inside.

Erin worries about my research, but still she helps me. I spend hours with the books and notes she brings. I make notes from her notes and I make folders. I label the folders by person and year and place. I occasionally write letters, but always I am reading and learning about people. I want to find them and remember them all.

Erin says Mom will take Paige for a while. They think I need a break. They think I am drinking too much. They think I need time to myself, but I know I will be fine. I promise I am looking after our Paige. I wake up every morning and get us both dressed and fed. We are safer here inside. And it's getting warmer now and I might soon feel like going out. I can hear the birds and I miss the apple blossoms and the walks outside we used to take through the tree-lined

streets of student housing and onto campus. I never mind hearing the shouts of students though, even now. I find their yelps of distant merriment comforting.

I'm so alone here, of course, but I also don't want to be around anyone else. Not really. You hated it when I got like this, when I wanted to seclude myself away. If you had lived I would have traveled with you. I would have left this place. I promise.

The police officer was so brusque, so concise when he told me the news. He told me you died only feet from a family's house. You were heading there for help. The family was oblivious inside with their Christmas Eve celebration, their lit room and hearth at their lakeside house. I have met this family since. They have a son who plays the cello and I imagine him practicing that night, his parents leaning into each other and listening to his music.

The fourteen-year-old son is the one who found you the next morning, frozen face down.

I blame myself, Seth. I should have gone with you. I should have been more concerned about safety, how fragile our stupid bodies really are. I have been vigilant about that now with Paige. Too much so, Mom and Erin say, which is why she needs to go live elsewhere for a while.

You had left your great-aunt's warm house in Marquette in search of your father. You finally met him two days before. You succeeded. You did it. You were supposed to come home. You were going to meet him again when your car slid on the icy road and went into that lake. You were able to extract yourself from the car and you made your way to the lit house on the shore, your feet punching through the ice.

The woman who lives in that house told me she looks from her bedroom window at the frozen holes you made with your boots. Wet from the lake, everything crystallized around you. Your skin temperature plummeted. You stumbled toward whatever light you saw.

I have been learning about what happened to you, Seth. Did you know that children can survive at lower temperatures than adults? Human flesh can freeze in five minutes at fifty below.

It's been such a cold winter and I worry about the animals, too. Around here, there was a dog found frozen in his backyard cage. He was discovered with his jaw clamped around the bars. Sensing the end, he'd tried to chew himself to safety.

Humans can adapt to cold, though. Australian aborigines slept naked outdoors on the hard ground. They slept through close-to-freezing nights, but their bodies were able to stop them from shivering. Nearly hypothermic, they adapted to hold on to heat until morning. There are Norwegian fisherman who can go without gloves. Every so often, the capillaries in their hands send out blooms of blood to warm them. Erin searches for "optimistic" research like this to bring me. But I still learned everything that happened to you.

Seth, eventually, in that snow, you gave up the ability to shiver. You ripped off your clothes before you died. You believed you were burning in cold. You could no longer recognize faces.

Mom is coming today to take Paige, but I know it's temporary. Seth, it is getting warmer outside. I can hear the song sparrows at the feeder outside our kitchen window. It will be strange to ever want to leave.

Love,

Your Kate

Pont-à-Mousson

Caleb's wife, Erin, doesn't miss Wisconsin at all. She tells him this before she leaves for the night, her black jeans tucked into black boots and her eyes rimmed in clumpy mascara. "Bah, oui," she says when Caleb asks if she'll be out late. She is starting to look French, act French, talk French. Her mouth even puckers into a pout when she speaks. It's the way the engineers at the foundry look when they show Caleb their pattern casts for manhole covers. He stares as their lips pinch around words.

"I'm going to Antoine's." Erin holds the door open, her hand clicks the bolt in and out, locked and unlocked, like a restless teen. Antoine is Erin's inappropriately-young student friend. She met him on a bus. Erin pulls the door shut before Caleb responds. He listens to her pounding steps echo through the stairwell and decides: tonight, he will follow her.

It's Thursday and Caleb and Erin used to spend these evenings together, their "research night" they called it back home. They'd cook their favorite meal—baked chicken with cranberry salsa—and look through documents, share interesting facts, bits of their newest fascinations with each other. They'd always end up making out on the top of manila folders and inter-library loans.

Erin hasn't been quite herself the past year, but during the last two weeks, Caleb's noticed, she has completely transformed. She no longer seems like the thirty-six year old history scholar, the composed academic with a sense of humor. It's as if she's reverted to some impossible version of herself. Back home, she was slowly finishing up her graduate studies; she kept changing her focus—passionately researching nineteenth-century religious movements one day and early American land management the next. Erin took a leave of absence last year and Caleb doubts whether she will ever return.

Caleb trails Erin down the stairwell and out into the courtyard. Outside, the air smells burnt and rusty with metallurgy byproducts. Caleb ticks off chemical waste in his head—carbon monoxide, hydrogen sulfide, sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide, benzene. He turns away from the factory with its maze of rusted gray smokestacks and pipes. The sun is beginning to set over the low hills beyond the abbey and Caleb follows Erin down a cobblestone sidewalk. When Caleb turns away from the foundry, it changes his view of the town—how lovely the old, peeling buildings can look, how quaint the wide arched bridge over the Moselle River.

About fifty feet ahead of him, Erin reaches the bridge, stops, and looks around. Caleb hides behind the faded stone wall of their building. The swans below her honk and she looks lovely there on the old bridge, her brown hair blowing in her face and sticking to her lip gloss.

"I can see you, Caleb." Erin parts her hair as it whips into her mouth. "But go ahead and follow me."

Caleb peeks around the cracked, stucco wall. "Okay," he says. She continues on her way and, after she reaches the center of town, ducks into the market. He waits in the faded arcade across the street and sees her exit with a fresh baguette and a bottle of cheap merlot. She tears off a hunk of bread and plops it in her mouth. She throws a piece toward the fountain. "It's for you, Caleb," she says, as if he's a pigeon. She walks through the central plaza, past the arcade where he stands, and down a side street heading south.

At Saint-Gobain, the local factory, Caleb specializes in manhole covers. He is an archivist, studying their design and history. He usually works at the foundry in Neenah, Wisconsin, his hometown and manhole cover capital of America. Here in France, though, Pont-à-

Mousson is the place. All over the country, roads contain cast iron covers marked with the town's name.

Caleb hates living here. Their entire apartment is covered in baby blue linoleum tiles and the walls are pink and the windows finished with white-lace curtains. They found housing at the last minute and, since Erin volunteers as an English assistant, they live inside the local high school in a vacant apartment adjacent to student dormers. Their unit sits above the cafeteria and overlooks a courtyard where students gather between classes. At all hours of the day, teenage snickers filter through walls and open windows. Caleb can hear the lip-smacking sound of kids greeting each other in the courtyard, their kiss-kiss hello. It makes him feel old and foreign. He's separate from everything out there.

Right after they arrived in France, Erin became enamored with the life of Père Jacques Marquette, the French Jesuit priest and explorer of North America. Marquette is also the namesake of the high school where they reside: Lycée Jacques Marquette. He spent a few years studying philosophy and teaching at a Jesuit institution once located on the premises. Also, as Erin says, Marquette is the namesake of towns and colleges throughout the Midwest. He established missions in the upper peninsula of Michigan, a few towns away from where she vacationed as a little girl.

Caleb brought Erin to France under the premise of his research. But, really, they came for her. At least that's what Caleb tells himself, that sometimes escaping can provide an answer. Nearly a year ago to the day, Erin was watching his sister's five-year-old son, Taylor, when the boy chased a runaway bicycle into the street, was hit by a silver Prius, and died. Whenever Erin talks about the incident—which is rarely—she describes colors. The silver car, the red bicycle, Taylor's green overalls, and the woman who ran out of her front door clutching car keys, the

house behind her a deep shade of eggplant. Only once did Erin describe the paramedics hoisting Taylor's body, how she tried not to look at the pooling red blood in the street.

Caleb would never dream of bringing up the subject now. Just as he learned not to bring up the stillborn baby Erin had before they met, before she left Michigan for graduate school. Lately all Erin wants to talk about is Marquette: where he walked, where he went, where he thought.

"I feel so connected to him," Erin told Caleb recently. She wore a black mesh top that formed spider web designs on her skin. "To Marquette." She'd stumbled in at two in the morning, her eyes watery, unable to focus. "We've crossed paths." She overlapped her arms in front of her face for emphasis.

"You high, E?"

"Marquette would have been much shorter than you." She stared out the window at the Moselle, black in the quiet night. "No, I don't actually know that." Her face crumpled like she was about to cry. "I made that up."

At the top of the hill, Erin enters the laundromat near the train station. Through the window, Caleb watches Antoine folding his too-tight black-sleeved T-shirts. Caleb sees Erin sitting in a chair watching Antoine thumb coins into the dryer. Caleb spies on her from outside a döner kebab restaurant next door.

At twenty years old, Antoine is thirteen years younger than Erin. He studies philosophy at the Université de Nancy and shares her interest in history and Jacques Marquette. Antoine's family owns a bakery near the church and he likes to loan Erin CDs of French chanteuses crooning melancholy love songs.

Through the window, Erin waves at Caleb, mimes eating and points at the restaurant's sign. She wants him to bring her dinner. He orders the kebab and walks over to the laundromat. Inside, the washing machines hum and the floor is dusty, littered with dryer lint. A sign on the wall says *LESSIVE A MAIN INDERDIT*. Hand washing forbidden.

"You're still following me," Erin says, before taking a bite of the kebab, a food item Caleb would never eat. The sight of the conical meat, like a sweating wasps' nest, turning under warmers all day in the window repulses him. "I thought we were over that, the stalking, the protecting."

"Me too," he says.

Erin finishes her kebab and Antoine shoots Caleb glares from of the corner of his eye. They never speak due to the supposed language barrier, though each understands enough. If they really tried, Caleb knows, they could converse. Antoine, however, hates him. "He thinks you're a philistine," Erin explained once and Caleb nodded. Most people didn't credit his love of manhole covers as an intellectual pursuit.

Caleb picks up the container of laundry powder and pours it into his palm. He looks at it as if he is examining sediment for gold and asks Erin about her plans for the night, where she is going, who she'll be with.

"I told you that already." Erin wipes a greasy hand on her jeans. "To Antoine's."

Caleb says maybe he'll just go with them and Erin nods and throws away the kebab wrapper and Antoine grabs his laundry basket and clothes. They all crawl into Antoine's blue Peugeot and the laundry gets stacked next to Caleb in the backseat. It smells like lavender in there, fresh and flowery, and Caleb knows he feels safer than he should as Antoine weaves around roundabouts, past the old church, before parking in front of the bakery.

A full two weeks ago, on a Thursday, Caleb began to worry about Erin when he came home from work and found her lying on the linoleum with her eyes closed. The early-evening sunlight filtered through the eyelet holes in the curtains and she looked peaceful there, a slight smile stretching across her face. Caleb asked what she was doing. He set a bag of groceries on the counter, pulled a chair from the table, and leaned over her.

"I'm imagining this place in the seventeenth century."

"What do you see?"

"Less of everything," she said, sitting up on her elbows, her eyes still locked on the ceiling. "Less people, buildings, trash."

"Plastic hasn't even been invented," Caleb said, wanting to put his hands on her arms.

Erin squinted her eyes in thought. "Not for hundreds of years." She nestled back down, wiggling her shoulder blades against the blue floor as if snuggling into covers. She shut her eyes. "The abbey down the street isn't here, just the Jesuit school, priests-in-training rushing by in robes, sheep on the nearby hill, the stone castle on Mousson a little less crumbled. It's quiet."

Caleb was reminded of Erin's behavior after the accident, when he began following her around Neenah. She would go to the site and, sometimes in the middle of the night, lie down in the street. She'd curl up close to where she'd seen the bloodstain, which slowly faded away in the rain and sun. Caleb began openly following her footsteps. He stood guard over her on the pavement and diverted any late-night cars around the scene. Erin didn't stop and neither did he, knowing she must not mind the company. They related silently this way for a while and it was as if Caleb was reading her diary, as if he had access to her thoughts. He felt close to her just watching, making sure she was okay.

When the accident happened, everyone expected Caleb to make a choice. It was his family or Erin, it could never be all of them. They could never fit altogether again. When Caleb got an unexpected grant and the opportunity to go to France, he thought: this was their chance. He and Erin could get away from Neenah, away from his family, away from that awful mark on the street.

Antoine's family's apartment is warm and smells like sourdough, heated from the industrial ovens in the bakery below. Inside, his parents are in the midst of a dinner party—his mother passes a carafe of red wine to a woman draped in a purple scarf. "Bienvenue," she calls out and invites them to stay. Erin places her merlot and half-eaten bread on the counter.

The walls are painted gray and hung with geometric, abstract art. The dinner party, made up of three couples, sits at a wooden table under a large pendant light that looks like a dented globe. A man in tweed and silver-rimmed glasses pulls out a chair and beckons to Erin, as if he recognizes her. They strike up a conversation in French. Antoine goes around the room and kisses all the women on the cheek and then grabs the wine from a well-dressed man. He pours it for the table, hovering carefully over each glass. The empty bottles on the counter and the decibel of laughter suggest everyone has been drinking for hours. Caleb pulls a chair over to the table and takes a sip of his wine. Antoine points at the small, thin woman with stringy dark hair seated across from him. "English," Antoine says as he sets the carafe next to a bowl of pears.

"Ah yes, I'm from Boston," the woman says. Her voice is high and abrasive; Caleb is sure he won't like her. "You don't speak French?"

Caleb tells her he knows a little, that he understands, but always feels people's impatience as he speaks. He can sense their need for him to cease talking, to finish. "My wife is better," he says. "She has a knack for languages." Caleb asks the woman what she's doing in France.

"Oh, I live here now. I married a Frenchman who was studying in the States." She points to the man engaged in conversation with Erin. The rest of the table seems caught up in a debate about the social exploits of the French president and his wife. Erin and the man lean toward each other and Caleb hears snatches of words: Marquette, l'explorateur.

"My wife is telling your husband about Jacques Marquette, it seems."

The woman nods. "It's a name I should know? It might sound familiar."

"The Jesuit priest who lived here." Caleb gestures toward the floor. "In France. In Pont-à-Mousson. And then founded missions in the upper peninsula of Michigan. And later, helped map the Mississippi." Caleb runs his hand through his hair, aware he is telling his wife's story. "Or part of it, anyway."

"And your wife. She studies him—this is part of her work?" The woman's English seems a little stilted, like someone unused to its daily practice.

"Something like that," Caleb says, staring at Erin who has her right hand perched over her wineglass, her fingers pressing around its opening. She laughs at a joke Caleb doesn't understand, some bit of French he can barely even hear.

A couple of days after Caleb found Erin on the linoleum, he found something else. He'd spent hours at the foundry organizing a file archive of manhole cover design plans. He got back late that evening and saw a torn scrap of paper on the table. It had been dipped in tea and scorched at the edges to look old, like a school history project. She'd written in English so, Caleb

presumed, he could read it. The handwriting was Erin's, but a slanted, flourished version of it, as if she'd tried to make it look antique.

March 19, 1665, Jacques Marquette to the Superior General of the Order in Rome

The seventh year of teaching being completed, but the twenty-eighth of my life, with another round of studies before me, I approach Your Paternity. . . that [you] command me to set out for foreign nations, of which I have been thinking from early boyhood and the first light of reason, insomuch that I desired to go to them even before I knew about them. . .

Caleb read the note three times before moving. He kept the paper in his hand as he looked for Erin in the bedroom, the bathroom, the living room. Out the window, he saw her across the street, in front of the church. She ran her fingers over Gothic carvings in the stone. Caleb went out to her and guided her back inside, back through the courtyard past students making out on a bench, up the stairs and into their apartment.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"I just wanted to see the church." She explained how the door was locked and so she examined the exterior, walked around feeling the ridges carved by armies of craftsmen, so many years ago.

"We could go on Sunday," Caleb said. "We could tour it." He didn't mention the letter. When he started following Erin through the streets of Neenah last year, they never spoke about it. Some things just happened quietly between them.

"I want to see the archways."

On Sunday, Caleb and Erin went to the 9 a.m. service at L'eglise Saint-Martin. Neither of them cared much for religion, but Caleb was secretly glad to attend. He found himself missing

Wisconsin's zealous church culture a little, that community of so many other people believing in something. He liked to imagine those Christians in one place, under a vaulted ceiling, looking up. He found it strangely comforting. He'd expressed this to Erin once, before Taylor's death, before everything. "That's creepy, Caleb," she'd said.

At Saint-Martin, only a few people were gathering near a small space heater in the nave. There was no fruit punch, no Sunday School finger-painting on the walls, all of the things Caleb imagined church included. The cavernous stone building was freezing, even in the spring. Erin warmed her arms with her hands and walked around the perimeter. Once she had done a full loop back through the sacristy and around the side, she stopped in front of tiny risers full of prayer candles in glass jars. Caleb deposited a euro coin into a metal box and handed Erin a crisp candle. She lit it and placed it at the end of the first row.

She walked back toward the door and Caleb followed her. "The church construction began in the thirteenth century and finished in the fifteenth," she said to him, reading from a brochure. "I'm a terrible historian." She folded the pamphlet in her hands. "I should have known that."

"So Marquette would have come here?" Caleb pointed toward the ceiling.

Erin turned toward him, her face brightening at the reminder. "Yes."

They left before the service even began. They went and sat quietly at a café in Place Duroc. They sipped steamed milk and watched the pigeons land on the old, broken fountain. Caleb thought about the way Erin's face lit up at the thought of Marquette within those walls and he wanted to remember it, wanted to harness whatever it was that could create such a spark in her again.

At the dinner party, the thin-haired woman taps her fingers around the stem of her wineglass. “And what do you do?” she asks Caleb. She pulls her chair closer to the table.

“I work with manhole covers. I’m an archivist.”

The woman smiles slowly. “And how does one archive manhole covers, exactly?”

“Photos, designs, that kind of thing.”

The woman looks up, appears to be mulling this over in her mind. “Oh wow,” she says. “Tell my husband about this, too.” She gets his attention and, in doing so, summons the eyes of everyone at the table.

Caleb takes a huge sip of wine, feeling the room’s stare. He looks up, past Antoine’s glare and toward the window outside. He tells the room how millions of Neenah manhole covers can be found across the U.S., how the Neenah Foundry began in 1872, how they started by making cast-iron plow blades, bean pots, and sleigh shoes. He tells them about Pont-à-Mousson covers, how Saint-Gobain started in 1856 after iron ore deposits were discovered at Marbache. He stresses the fact that manholes are access ways, he likes to use the phrase subsurface conduits, when explaining them, but also tells them that maintenance hole is the new gender-neutral term. He tells them there’s a maintenance hole in New York that’s seventy stories deep, that they must be at least 22 inches in diameter. Caleb tells them Romans invented the underground sewer, that they were dug by hand and lined with brick, that some of their stone covers still cap holes in Jordan. Caleb can’t stop once he’s started. He tells them cover patterns are designed large because the iron shrinks while cooling. He tells them cast iron is iron that is melted then poured, that gray cast iron contains carbon and silicon, that these alloying agents give the metal its incredible strength.

“Ça suffit,” Erin says from across the table. “Let someone else tell a story.”

"Non, mais c'est très intéressant," the Boston woman's French husband says. One woman asks for a translation and the man recounts some of what Caleb has told them. He hears, "accès sous terre," and the man dips his hand, as if demonstrating a pathway under the ground.

Last Wednesday, a few days after the church visit, Caleb found another Marquette letter, this time taped to the bathroom mirror. Next to it, Erin had scrawled "xoxo" in lipstick.

August 4, 1667, Jacques Marquette, Cap de la Magdeleine, to Father Pupin, whom he knew from school in Pont-à-Mousson

God has surely had pity on me. Since I have been in this country, I have felt no dislike whatever for it nor had the least thought of wishing to be back in France. You know that I had no memory at all when I was there. . .

Caleb found the letter after returning home to eat lunch and check on Erin in the middle of the day. Caleb searched for his wife again in the empty apartment. He heard the sounds of the cafeteria below ring through the walls. For a moment, he got down on the floor and put his ear to the linoleum. He could smell the couscous and chicken from below and he listened for Erin's voice amidst the din of French language and forks beneath him.

After pulling himself up, he walked outside, kept searching. He found Erin standing huddled in a group of French teenage girls, all wearing black tights and smoking. Erin took drags of a cigarette slouched against the building.

"Vous avez un problème?" one girl asked Caleb, after he walked up to the group and stared for a little while. "Qui est le mec?" she asked Erin, wanting to know who he was.

“Mon mari,” Erin said. Caleb understood the word for “husband.” Erin laughed and the girls snickered, said something in French about bombs, or missiles. “They think you’re cute,” Erin said, giving his bicep a squeeze. “Let’s go back upstairs.” She threw her cigarette on the sidewalk and stubbed it into the mortared crack in the cobblestone.

Caleb followed her up the steps and when they reached the door, he asked her what was going on. “What am I supposed to do?” he asked. “What are you telling me?”

Erin ran her hand along Caleb’s ear. “Do you know why Marquette is famous, why we remember him?”

Caleb said he did not.

“Because his maps and journals survived, didn’t capsize in a canoe. Poor Louis Jolliet, he went on that trip down the Mississippi, too, you know. And so did some other explorers we don’t remember at all.” Erin walked over to the television and turned it on. They’d borrowed the set from the school, an older classroom model on an A/V cart. A French version of Jeopardy was playing and Erin sank into the futon to watch.

“So, you’re not going to explain?” Caleb asked.

Erin crossed her arms over her chest, kept her eyes on the game show. She shook her head without looking at him. “I don’t even know if I could.”

Caleb waits for the room to stop looking at him. Erin nods at him like she used to at her department dinner parties, trying to reward his nervous attempts at social contribution, to signal that he did his part and could retreat back into silent observation. Caleb decides to excuse himself to the balcony. The group pours brandy made from local mirabelle plums. Antoine hands him a glass on the way out.

Caleb stays outside and watches, sipping from his brandy. As he looks on, everyone seems to be getting pretty drunk—the laughter sounds louder, the gestures loom larger. People have to yell for their voices to be heard above the ruckus. Caleb's fogged mind feels lighter than it has in weeks and he wishes Erin would join him outside. When he turns away from the party, his view looks out at Mousson, at the hill and medieval castle ruins that sit atop it. He and Erin hiked to the top when they first moved here. They shared bread and a hunk of cheese sitting in the grass, surrounded by the remnants of a fortress.

When he resumes watching the dinner guests, Erin looks up at him from the table. She is explaining something to Antoine and his parents and she makes a circle by forming her hands into two facing "C's." She then threads her fingers together, squeezing her hands into one big fist. She points to Caleb and all four of them consider him, as if they are waiting for him to speak.

After the note taped to the mirror, Caleb looked for Erin's Marquette letters, waited for the telltale teabags and the smell of burnt paper. Last night, a week after her last episode, Caleb came home late and discovered their bedroom transformed. Erin had xeroxed illustrations of Marquette and tacked them to the wall so that it looked like the inside of a young girl's locker, or a bedroom celebrity collage. They all showed Marquette in his Jesuit robes. One picture depicted him looking almost frightened in a floppy, wilted hat. Marquette held a cross in one hand, the chain slipped between his fingers. The photocopy had been shaded over with colored pencils, all greens and yellows in the background.

On their pillow sat another letter:

May 1674 from Marquette's unfinished journal of his final expedition to explore the Mississippi

. . . they also said that the great river was very dangerous, when one does not know the difficult places; that it was full of horrible monsters, which devoured men and canoes together; that there was even a demon, who was heard from a great distance. . .

Caleb crumpled the sepia-stained document in his hands. He walked through the empty apartment and this time, knew Erin wasn't right outside. He called her name out the window and then took to the streets. First, he checked Antoine's, but Erin wasn't there, he hadn't heard from her. Caleb then checked the local bar, but she wasn't there either. "L'amèricaine?" he asked wherever he went and people knew what he meant, that he was looking for the American woman who was acting fifteen.

Finally, Caleb thought to go to the one nightclub in town, Le Swing. It was only 9:30 in the evening, but Erin was there beneath the flashing strobes, dancing to DJ mixes of American pop songs. She was surrounded by a group of teenage girls and boys from the lycée.

"Caleb!" she shrieked when he entered. "Voilà!" She spun in a circle waving her arms in the air. She stopped and turned to him. "We snuck in."

"Erin, I'm sure that wasn't necessary." Caleb looked around at the nearly empty

dance floor. The bartender glared at him while drying a goblet-shaped glass. "You're thirty-three."

The teen boys stood around Caleb with their chests puffed up, as if ready to fight him at any moment. The girls' faces revealed a mixture of apathy and judgment. They all wore black

and dancing had pasted their sweaty hair in little frames around their young, flushed faces. Caleb took Erin by the shoulders. He guided her toward home.

Erin finally walks out to the balcony where Caleb stands. She runs her hand through his hair and scratches his scalp. “Ça va?” she asks.

“Doesn’t Marquette bother you?” Caleb pulls Erin’s drooping sleeve over an exposed bra strap.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, the whole imperialism, missionary thing, the fact that he discovered land that was already occupied.”

“Oh yes,” she says and shakes the sleeve back down. “Of course it does.” Erin grabs the cast-iron rail of the balcony. “I am fascinated by his false purpose. How he used it to justify his life.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I wonder about certainty in general.” Erin pulls a scroll out of her pocket, another artifact she has aged in tea and fire. She removes a rubber hair tie and unrolls it for Caleb.

“This is his report card from 1658. I found it in one of the books I’m reading.”

Caleb takes the paper from her. On it she has written Marquette’s evaluations in character, ability, and temperament. She includes both the original Latin and the English translation.

Ingenium (General ability) Mediocris (Mediocre)

Judicium (Judgment) Mediocris (Mediocre)

Prudentia (Prudence) Mediocris (Mediocre)

Complexio naturalte (Temperament) Melancolica (Melancholic)

After a minute, Erin takes the report card back and folds it into tiny squares and puts it in her pocket. “It seems he was a lackluster scholar, too.” She grabs Caleb’s brandy and drinks from it. He lets her finish the glass.

Throughout the night, they continue to get good and drunk on the mirabelle. The noise in the apartment seems to get louder and louder. The three couples eventually leave and Antoine’s parents go to sleep. Erin and Antoine camp out on the thin, uncomfortable couch in the living room. Antoine plays a documentary about restoring a seaside village in Brittany that Caleb has trouble following. Caleb sits on the floor and leans his back against an armchair. Antoine tucks his legs beneath himself next to Erin. He points to the screen where two men in khakis chip away at an ancient seawall with a hammer.

“She’s not going to sleep with you,” Caleb says. When he hears his voice out loud, it sounds surprisingly garbled and drunk.

“Excusez-moi?” Antoine says. “Excuse me?” he repeats in English, as if Caleb is too dim to translate.

“I said, she’s not going to sleep with you.”

Antoine looks disgusted. He leans over closer to where Caleb sits. “And you, monsieur. You were not invited to my soirée.”

“Hm,” Caleb says, cocking his head toward Antoine and making eye contact. “Well, you were not invited to my life.” Caleb lies on the hardwood floor and puts his forehead on his hands. He turns over and looks up at the lofted ceiling, the artwork hangs at odd angles. “You don’t know what it’s been like. What Erin’s been doing.”

“I know,” Antoine says. “Je le sais,” he repeats. He goes down the hall and into another room. Caleb hears him rustle around, the sound of papers moving. Erin looks toward the door, her face blank, as if she’s still watching a movie.

Antoine returns holding a purple shoebox that says Cache Cache in cursive. He sets it on the lucite coffee table in front of Caleb. Caleb picks it up and looks inside. It is a diorama. In it, a small plastic figurine draped in a felt robe and a twist-tie belt bends near a tree. There is a disproportional duck near his feet. The man appears to be standing near a river where a cardboard canoe waits nearby. Around him, are hot-glued trees of various sizes and kinds, including plastic palms. To the figurine’s right, on the ground, there is a large black circle colored in with marker.

“What is this?” Caleb points to the dark smudge.

“Un grand,” Antoine stops, switches to English. “Hole,” he says. “A great big hole.” He says “big,” like beeeg, stressing its size.

Caleb runs his palm over the tops of the mismatched trees. Erin’s Marquette stands in this landscape, yanked out of history, pathetically tending a gigantic duck.

Caleb sighs. “Erin,” he says. “This has got to stop.” He looks up at her, but she turns away, not meeting his eyes.

“You see. I know,” Antoine says. “Je la connais bien” He slaps his hand on the transparent table.

Erin stands and Caleb watches as her eyes fill. “No,” she says and stands over Antoine. “You don’t.” She walks over to the counter and grabs her bread and bottle of wine. Caleb is worried she might drop it, but she motions to him and he follows her out the door.

It is two in the morning and Caleb and Erin sit in Antoine's parking lot passing the wine back and forth. The merlot is warm and velvety in Caleb's mouth. Next to him, Erin takes the bottle and pours a little wine into a puddle near their feet. Caleb watches it trickle into the spaces between gravel. He grabs the bottle back and gulps more so he doesn't have to see it. He's gotten so good at ignoring everything outside of their life here—it's been all him and Erin pan-grilling chicken on their miniature French stove. Him and Erin wrapped up in their individual research, poring through documents at the kitchen table, the students learning all around them and gossiping outside.

"My grant's almost up." The words seem to come involuntarily out of Caleb's mouth. "We can't stay here forever."

"We have savings." Erin digs her toe in the dusty parking lot. "There's no way I'll go back."

"I can only stay another month. I need to be with my family, my sister."

Erin nods, takes the wine bottle and guzzles more down. "I know what this means."

Once they've finished every last drop, they get up and begin to stumble back to the school. For a moment, Caleb can pretend they're nineteen again, stomping home from a college party. He wants to yell and laugh in the quiet streets as he once did in Wisconsin, back when he didn't care who he woke with his shouts. Back when everything wasn't ending and it was okay to celebrate a world he seemed to know.

Erin pulls a letter out of her trouser pocket. It is intricately folded like a passed note in biology class. Caleb puts the paper to his nose. It smells like Earl Grey.

"This one's not by Jacques," she says. "It's about him being exhumed and reburied a couple of years after his death. He was thirty-eight when he died of dysentery."

“I don’t want to read it. I’m done.” Caleb unfolds the note carefully and then crushes it in his fist, tosses it in front of them. It lands only a couple of feet away. Erin retrieves it. She flattens it against her thigh and then reads out loud. “What occurred at the Removal of the Bones of the late Father Marquette. They opened the grave, and uncovered the body; and, although the flesh and internal organs were all dried up, they found it entire, so that not even the skin was in any way injured.”

“Stop.” Caleb pulls Erin close him, sticks his nose into the crevice of her collarbone. His voice becomes muffled by her body. “Ça suffit,” he says in his terrible accent.

“Of course, Caleb,” she says. “I know.”

Caleb envisions the next month passing much too quickly. All of the ways he and Erin might say goodbye pass through his mind. In his worst fear, Erin simply kisses his face like a Frenchwoman, a peck on each cheek to send him on his way.

Caleb and Erin start walking again and support each other’s steps as they pass through the plaza in town. Before they get to the bridge, they go by Caleb’s favorite manhole cover. The design is simple, standard—little dashes in opposite directions, “PONT-A-MOUSSON” in block caps, looping the bottom. Caleb prefers it because of its location, that it’s like a stepping stone before the river.

“There it is,” he says. He points it out to Erin and she sits in the street. She yanks Caleb down so that he is on the other side of the cover, facing her. They clasp their hands together as if gathering near a table for prayer. They stay silent until Erin tears her baguette in two and hands a piece to Caleb.

In between bites, Caleb tells Erin about manhole covers in other parts of the world, how some covers in Bermuda and New Hampshire, of all places, are triangular. How during car races

through cities, covers must be welded down. Caleb tells Erin about covers in China; he explains how a few years ago people kept stealing them. Somehow, they could be wrenched from the ground and sold for scrap. Caleb tells Erin how dangerous it was, how pedestrians would occasionally fall into these holes in the road. He describes how out of nowhere, people dropped into the ground.

"Can you imagine?" Caleb asks.

Erin nods, her eyes closed and her head tipped back. Caleb takes her hand and brings it up to his face, sees her chipping black nail polish, her mood rings on nearly every finger. Erin's skin seems to glow underneath the moon and for a moment, she is someone different altogether, someone from another country, another time.

Caleb used to wish for a maintenance hole right beneath Erin's spot on the asphalt, that terrible place where she pretended to sleep. He wished he could crawl up to her there and pull her under the world. He only wanted to keep her safe. Caleb liked to imagine the two of them on ladders in that tunnel, looking through pick holes in the grate. And even now, he likes to pretend that maybe they could tuck themselves below the earth, take a passageway right under the river, and stop at the church, tumble into the crypt. He pictures them curling up for the night at the base of the reclining stone figure of a thirteenth-century knight. He sees the two of them heading out in the morning, walking below the pavement outside their apartment, listening for cars rumbling overhead, for wheels rattling iron circles in the street.

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