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## Cascadia Don't Fall Apart

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Cascadia Don't Fall Apart

Cascadia Don't Fall Apart

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This short story collection explores the tenuousness of relationships—both romantic and familial—against the backdrop of Washington State’s regional identity. These stories feature tsunami debris washing up on the peninsula, a biologist combating wetland violations in Olympia, a funerary artist in Seattle, young lovers attempting to be sexually explorative, a young man so befuddled by college graduation that he joins the infantry, and an adult son attempting to comfort his sick father.

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## FLOTSAM

After Kate and I broke up, I made terrible decisions. I wanted new disasters to obscure old ones, which is kind of like thinking the best way to recover from a car crash is to get into another vehicle and plow into the first thing you see. Heartbreak does not scatter; it makes everything part of the same wreckage.

Instead of dividing up our belongings, I packed three suitcases while Kate was at work, then drove up to Seattle. I stayed in the spare room my brother and his wife were converting into a nursery. I closed out bars alone, gawked at anyone. Gained weight. I took a job I should have known I'd hate, working for a home retrofitting company in the rich suburbs of Bellevue. Land of upscale strip malls. Castles of monogamy. Gelled-hair scions inspecting every seam, complaining about the gunpowder smell from the nail gun. *And does the insulation really have to be Easter bunny pink?* I was there two weeks when I began stealing from customers.

The first thing I ever took was a vintage Barbie doll wrapped in plastic. I was ripping up mildewed insulation in an attic when I found her in a box the homeowner forgot to remove. I remember holding the Barbie up to the work light, and the way dust and platinum shards of insulation glimmered around her torso. I stuffed her in my jumpsuit. Later on, I took Christmas sweaters from storage bins. I stole an unopened salad spinner, civil war coins, an Irish fantasy magazine called *Airgedlamh!* In a crawlspace, I found a half-torn wedding photo from the 80's with *Thanks for 21 years of shit!* scrawled in sharpie on the white of the bride's dress.

In addition to stealing things, I often showed up late, hungover. I pissed in immaculate gardens. Climbed on roofs for the hell of it. I did these things mostly to distract myself, to keep from thinking about Kate. But working in the darkness of crawlspaces, basements, and attics had this way of washing up memories. One moment I'd be installing an attic ventilator, then

suddenly I'd be standing in the bathroom doorway of our old apartment, watching Kate put anti-aging ointment on her face. She'd do this after sex, commando in the regal blue bathrobe my mother gave her for Christmas. Whenever she'd put that stuff on earlier, I'd know she wasn't in the mood—but not in any passive aggressive way. We'd simply been together long enough that every action insinuated another.

Then Dan, my boss, would get back from doing an estimate, find me lying in some dark corner on a bed of wood scraps and moist asphalt felt, respirator askew. *What the hell are you doing, Pa?* He called everyone *Pa*—probably the only endearing quality he had.

One time I told Dan what brought me to Seattle. It was an easy story to paraphrase. Together three years until I'm walking home from playing basketball and there's Kate's car in someone else's driveway. That afternoon, she comes home looking cross and self-conscious. I'm in such disbelief that I try to be the bigger asshole. I get down on a knee and ask her to marry me. She starts crying. The end.

When I was done telling my story, Dan threw a box of damp tax information down a ceiling cutout. "Some people have so much shit," he said.

Then I was rummaging through stuff in a daylight basement, and I found an orange blob about the size of a backpack, blossoming with flaps of silk like a bath loofa. I had found it sitting behind a pile of scuba gear, gardening tools, and dusty bins. The blob had been encased in a Plexiglas box, as if on display. It was easily the strangest thing I had ever found in a customer's house. After fingering the gauzy flaps of silk and poking its mushy center, I decided it had to be some kind of retarded bourgeois throw pillow.

I put the pillow aside and continued nailing foam boards to the concrete wall. Dan was cold calling in Summerset Villa, which left me to finish the job by the end of the day.

In the afternoon, I went around to the front of the house and rang the doorbell to ask for the bathroom. A woman answered. She gripped a stress ball against her leg and gave me a disparaging look. She sported the golden bracelets and darkly plastered makeup I'd come to expect from women in the area. But she was missing the fake tan and configured hair that insinuated dog shows, so I thought maybe she wasn't a complete dumbass.

I told her I needed to use the bathroom.

"I could have been with a client," she said. "Dan was supposed to tell you I run a massage therapy business from home."

"Maybe you should put up a sign."

"Yeah, the homeowner's association would love that." She motioned for me to come in but stopped midway. "What's up with the hoodie and sunglasses you were wearing earlier? You looked like the Unabomber."

"I hate mornings."

She said her name was Marita and took me inside. The bathroom smelled like ginger and chocolate. I stared at PG-rated painting of a nude Chinese woman as I pissed. When I came out, I looked down the hallway and saw Marita in the kitchen. She was just staring wide-eyed at the refrigerator, stress ball oozing from her fist. She looked unreal, like she was running on a voltage.

"You must be cold," she said. "Come have some coffee."

I came into the kitchen. "It's cold because your basement walls are just exposed concrete."



She pretended not to hear me as she filled our mugs.

“Chicory,” she said. “It’s a coffee substitute.”

I took the mug, looked around. On the refrigerator was a photo of Marita and some guy I assumed to be her husband, posing before a tropical sunset. He had enormous shoulders and wore an unbuttoned linen shirt. For a moment I pictured the two of them having sex, him above her like a toppled vending machine with arms.

“What does your husband do?” I asked

“Why—do you care?”

I looked back at the photo. “Probably not.”

Marita sat down at a barstool, then put her palms on her cheeks, staring down into her chickory. “What about you? Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Not anymore.”

“Well,” she waved her hand at my face, “you don’t exactly have that *capacity for devotion* look.”

“Thanks. Hey, how old are you?”

“Have you always been this rude, or did something happen to make you this way?”

“You look young.”

“Right.” She got up from her seat and came over to me. She stood at an intimate distance. I noticed her pretty neck, and the faint wrinkles around her eyes.

“Give me that back,” she said, then she took the chicory right out of my hand. “I can tell you don’t like it.” She put my mug in the sink, then went over to a small TV on the counter. She flipped it to the news, which was still covering a tsunami that had engulfed Japan. “A dog

stranded on debris for two weeks,” Brian Williams was saying. “Wait until you see the pictures of the rescue.”

Marita turned back to me. “Are you still in here? Get back to work. Mush!”

Back in the basement, I unwrapped the orange pillow again. I stuffed it in my lunch cooler, and then walked it out to my car.

At the end of the day, I took Marita down to the basement for a final walk around.

“My husband booked this a few months ago without telling me,” she said. “So, I barely know what I’m looking at.”

“You’re looking at a continuous thermal envelope.”

She laughed. “I guess it looks great, then.”

My room at Aaron and Liz’s condo was divided in two. On one side: my air mattress, three black suitcases erupting with clothes, stolen items from Bellevue homeowners, dirty dishes. On the other side: a bassinet, colorful blankets, an off-road-looking stroller, and a dinosaur mobile. Liz hadn’t been pregnant for very long, and the agreement was that I’d move out two months before her due date.

I remember leaning on their kitchen counters, getting asked about my feelings. But all I had were images, memories. Kate yelling *Sorry about your micropenis!* at men who stared at her. How eventually a man retaliated by throwing a beer bottle that sprayed broken glass onto her legs. Her opening the door to our apartment, breathless, needing me to dig out the tiny brown shards from her skin.

Disgusting intimacy. Sexual idiosyncrasies. Certain food. Seasonal affect disorder. The crux of who I thought I was. How could I talk about that? I had no perspective. Just a nostalgia

that made lists, felt like a lead weight tipping over in my head and pressing against my forehead. I wanted to smash everything.

But the day I brought home the orange pillow was a good one. We all laughed, and Liz placed it on the mantle in the living room. Its flaps of silk were expertly hand sewn, glimmering in waves like they were about to deliver a hologram. We said Marita had rubbed patient's backs with it like a medicinal loofa. We said she'd hung it over her bed like a new age dream catcher. Clutched the silky blob to her chest like a giant stress ball. It was the mystery of it, I guess.

Bellevue Retrofit was a new company with only a few employees, enabled by a recession-based bill Dan referred to as *cash for caulkers*. We were having trouble getting booked through the end of summer, so Dan came up with a marketing plan. He got an infrared camera that made houses totally saturated in different colors. Blue and green swaths showed where heat was secure, whereas orange and red swaths showed where heat escaped. Shrubs and sky came up black and silhouetted. He bought me khakis and a blue polo, said I'd be walking around taking pictures in Highland Villa, Cascadia Crest, Newport Estates. When the basement or attic of a house looked particularly volcanic, I had to knock on the door, show the homeowner the picture, and offer a free estimate. But most people pretended to be colorblind. Shook their head before I gave my speech. Yelled at me from balconies. Said *Go away* through intercoms.

Two weeks went by. I had almost forgotten about Marita and the orange pillow, though I had found a small drawstring that opened to an empty pouch in the center of the blob. Then Dan told me I had to go back and fix a crooked panel in Marita's basement, which was still under warranty. He said she requested me, even though I was the one who *Did the shoddy ass work, Pa*. If she accused me of stealing, I figured I had the upper hand since I welcomed getting fired.

I showed up at her door on a foggy morning. No cars or noise in the neighborhood, just beige houses curving around the cul-de-sac like neatly aligned teeth. Marita answered the door wearing ballet flats, jeans, a white t-shirt, and a big purple scarf. Gigantic sunglasses engulfed her petite face.

“Wait here.” She rushed back into the house. Since she left the door open, I made my way inside and into the living room. On a glass coffee table, I noticed a cluster of several different flower bouquets, all of which were dried and wilted. I opened up a card attached to one of the vases, and it said *We all miss Roger—he touched so many lives.*

Marita emerged from a hallway, holding a purse. “Steal anything yet?”

I put the card back. “Who’s Roger?”

“Roger is my husband.”

“Shit,” I said. “I’m sorry.” I tried to say it with empathy, but it came out like an eager platitude, and Marita let it drift off into silence. She looked like she wanted to stare a hole through me.

“I need you to come on a drive,” she said finally, then led me outside to her silver Jeep Cherokee.

“What about your crooked panel?”

“Yeah—I know you take your job *very* seriously. We’ll come back.” She jingled her keys at me. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Fuck no.” I got in, and Marita drove out of the development and onto I-90 east towards the Issaquah Alps. The green, rounded peaks stood out against the stark grey sky.

“I have a question,” said Marita. “If you died unexpectedly, what would you want to happen to your remains? I mean this hypothetically, of course.”

I thought for a moment. “I’d like my body to be dragged out to the middle of the forest and just left there. No coffin or anything.”

“I should have guessed you’d give me some idiotic answer.”

“Well, hypothetically, what do I care if I’m dead? What does it matter when everything’s already gone to shit?”

“It matters.”

“Okay.”

We took an exit off the freeway and pulled into an industrial part of town—all grey warehouses, gravel, and loading docks.

“What happened to your girlfriend, anyways?”

“She banged some other guy.”

“Shit,” she said, mocking me. “I’m sorry.”

Marita slowed the car, then parked across the street from a Carpet Liquidators. “You ever heard of Waller and Sons?” She pointed across the street where the name was stenciled on the front of a tinted glass door. When I shook my head, she got out of the car.

Inside, a large room with high, fuzzy windows. In the background, the agitated violins of Mozart’s “Requiem.” Amassed on each wall, artwork of all shapes. Bright, glass slabs etched with names and designs, some encasing flower petals or bubbling with air pockets. Colored spheres the size of schoolroom globes. Multi-angled wood boxes like modern treasure chests. And in the middle of it all, standing on an island of sawdust, sanding a canoe-shaped piece of wood on sawhorses, a man in a grey t-shirt. It was a moment before he noticed we were there.

“Marita,” he said. “It’s good to see you.” He came over and gave her a hug. He was tall and broad chested. Blonde hair swept across his forehead. He looked like he should be flying an airplane.

“Jeff here really likes the urn you made for Roger, so I thought I’d bring him in.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “Maybe I should let you look around.” He started pointing around the room. “Over there are our cast-glass headstones, then our architectural caskets, our soft urns, and memorials.”

On the shelf of items he called soft urns there was a pink, foam arch, a hive of yellow braids, and a leather pouch tied by red string, forming a cross.

“Urn,” I said.

Marita put her hands on her hips and nodded at me in a “Fuck you” sort of way.

“Thanks, but this isn’t for me.” I walked outside alone. A bread truck drove by. A territorial crow cawed and swooped down at my head. I started thinking about myself in layers. Some guy on this patch of gravel, in Issaquah, with this woman, working this job, living in Washington, some stranger’s urn at home. It was almost comforting, all the shit that had piled up in Kate’s absence.

Marita came out a minute later.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” I said.

“Oh, I don’t know—maybe because you’re an incredulous asshole.”

On the drive back, Marita told me how Roger died. A month and a half ago, he took a drive out to the Olympic Peninsula to go scuba diving. She said he checked into Curley’s Dive Shop, and was seen waiting outside with his gear for a potential diving partner. When he didn’t come home, Marita called the cops and they found his car, sunglasses, wallet, and keys at a

staging area near the water. They called in scuba divers, boats, and a helicopter to scour the Strait of Juan de Fuca for his body. The Canadian coast guard came out from Vancouver Island. Conditions were good, with only light winds and a visibility of 20 feet. Then two days into the search, a man named Nick Garvey came to the police and told them he had been scuba diving with Roger on the day he disappeared. He simply lost sight of Roger while exploring cavernous sea stacks. He said he surfaced, then figured Roger had set out on his own. Two weeks later, they called off the search, and Marita went to Waller & Sons.

“So, you bought an urn even though you never found his body?”

“The urn is made of biodegradable silk, so if his body never turns up, I can throw it into the ocean as a gesture. Sound stupid? When I went to see Matt I felt like my mind had been emptied out. The urn didn’t embarrass me until I brought it home. You know, the silk is orange so Roger can still be a *source of light* in my life. Fuck.” She pushed against the steering wheel so her back pressed into the seat. “I put it in the basement, and when it disappeared, I thought about letting you keep it.”

When I looked back on the months before we broke up, I found that Kate and I had still been chasing new and vivid things together. We went to parties. We wasted money on expensive cocktails in modern bars. We researched dog breeds most acclimated to apartment living. We had sex in the shower and drove to the arboretum to catch the last blooms of cherry blossoms, ducking in backgrounds of couples taking engagement photos. So after, I sifted through each memory, wanting to find the exact moment Kate fell out of love with me. And from there I could work forward, know what events were tinged with the indifference that made her desire someone else.

So here's what I came up with: Kate and I at a party, and from across the room I see her talking to another guy. Nothing special, except all she does is nod, over and over again. The guy has a dark beard and long hair—a cross between a metal-head and those more racially accurate depictions of Jesus Christ. The world speaking in some code I can't decipher.

The guy I actually caught Kate with was someone I knew—a coworker. But my mind kept returning to that moment. There was something in that scene I missed. Something too close to touch. So he's who I imagined Kate fucking. It kept me up at night, kept even phantom arms from curling around my shoulder. Dominated my dreams. Became my mind's exclusive truth.

But the night after going to Waller & Sons, I thought about Marita. While falling asleep, I was picturing her there, stranded in the dark cavity of her suburban home, clearing her throat for no other reason than to make sure the silence in her bed could be interrupted, and thinking—how could someone gone still be a source of light? I remember going into the living room, and even with all the lights off I could see the orange of Roger's urn. The color was so ridiculous and electric, like a sea anemone in black water. Something breathing I could be folded into.

The next morning before work, I grabbed the urn off the mantle. I wanted something to put it in, but when I searched the condo, all I found were green canvas bags that had *RECYCLE LIFE!* printed on them. I put it in a plastic garbage sack.

All morning at work, I stood in a garage loading pallets of fiberglass insulation into a hopper the size of a refrigerator. The hopper chewed up the pallets with big, rotating blades, then shot it through a hose up into the attic, where Dan spread it evenly across bare support beams. Around noon, he stuck his head down into the garage and told me to take lunch. I said I was eating fast food today and went to Marita's instead.



When she opened the door, I held out the bag and said I was sorry. The bagged urn looked even worse in the sunlight—I could see its swollen outline through the thin plastic.

“Very classy,” she said, taking it from me.

“Can I come inside?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know—I feel like maybe you want someone to talk to.”

She pretended to laugh. “I have everyone to talk to. It’s part of my job.”

I stared at her for a second. When I looked away, I saw two men wearing bicycle helmets go promenading by on Segways.

“All right,” she said. “You can come inside for a second—but I have a client coming.”

I followed Marita down a hallway to a large room. Centered in the room was a massage table with tousled white sheets. Candles on oak shelves. A rock waterfall trickled in a corner. Wooden inspirational plaques saying things like *SERENITY* and *LOVE* decorated the walls.

She put the urn on a counter.

“What are you going to do with it?” I asked.

Marita opened a linen closet, then started changing the sheets on the table. “I don’t know. What do you know about the Strait of Juan de Fuca?”

“Not much.”

“The current runs east towards a bunch of unincorporated islands, some of which are just low grasslands with abandoned lighthouses. And most of the shoreline out there is wildlife refuge, which means miles and miles of undeveloped rainforest.” She chucked the dirty sheets across the room into a wicker basket. “And when you dive in a dry suit, you’re buoyant. You have weights that are on quick release.”

“So, you’re still looking for his body?”

“I’m not really looking, exactly. But I still go out there, and I guess it’s possible. Back when the search was on, I just spent a lot of time on the peninsula. All that hiking and exploring made me feel better, so I kept doing it.” She started smoothing the starched sheets on the massage table with her hands.

“That sounds like looking to me.”

“All right, let’s pretend your ex girlfriend disappeared back when you were together. How long would it take before you gave up entirely?”

“I feel like that’s not a fair question.”

“Didn’t you love her?”

“Fine. I’d search forever. Until I went certifiably insane, which seems to be how you’re handling it.”

She looked me up and down. “You know, if I was ten years younger, you’d *so* be my boyfriend.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, you would.”

“Why ten years ago?”

She stood on her toes to light a candle on a high shelf. Her shirt pulled up and revealed how her skinny waist curved into her hips. Then she turned around. “I wasn’t very smart ten years ago.”

“Oh, is that when you got married?”

She stopped what she was doing and crossed her arms at me

“Sorry. I’m actually here because I feel like I owe you.”

“You owe me nothing.” She grabbed my shoulders, spun me around, and pushed me down the hall towards the front door. She lingered for a moment. “Most of my patients have been in car wrecks. You know what some people think causes most cases of whiplash and spinal cord injuries? It’s when the person tenses up and braces for impact. They say that’s why drunk drivers get injured less—they go limp and surrender to inertia. You want to help someone through a disaster? You keep them company and let it bang them around.”

I came back a few times in the next weeks. At lunch, on the way home, in between trips to the hardware store. I never stayed very long. Marita would take me into the back room while she prepped for clients or into the kitchen for some ridiculous herbal beverage. We’d talk about Kate or Roger sometimes, but we weren’t any good at turning them into conversations. We were just waiting for our turns to speak. It sounds empty, but it actually felt good, not pretending to care about each other’s problems. Once I described a series of portraits Kate had been working on, which depicted women saints who were martyred during the Roman Empire. I don’t know how I got on that subject, but I remember Marita said, “Kate sounds like a real bitch,” out of nowhere.

When there were no cars parked in Marita’s driveway, that meant she was out west. She’d come back and talk about tides and geological formations. She described her trips to Orcas Island, out past the alpaca farms and lavender fields towards obscure mud flats, to the pebbled beaches of Canada and the barnacled rocks of the Salish Sea. To Smith Island, Waldron, San Juan. It had been two months since he disappeared. I wondered when she’d admit to herself that Roger’s body was gone forever, and the places he could be were dwindling down to a few scraps of uninvestigated Peninsula far from where he had last been seen.

One day in early June, I came in and sat down on Marita's desk while she thumbed through insurance papers.

"Did you ever meet Roger's dive partner?" I said.

She put the papers down. "You mean Nick Garvey? Some fucking dive partner."

"Do you ever think he maybe left out some details—like, out of guilt or something?"

"You know what I think? I think I met him at the police station in Port Angeles. His story sounded convincing. But I also remember watching him drive away in a station wagon brimming with old computers. What kind of weirdo has a station wagon full of old computers? That's what I think about Nick Garvey."

Marita walked into the massage room and started organizing her oils on a tray. She slammed them down like she was cleaning up someone else's mess.

Then her phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket, uttered a few apologies, then hung up. "God fucking damnit," she said.

"What?"

She climbed onto the massage table, face down in the little blue pad shaped like a toilet seat. "Lost another customer because of an insurance company, and he calls to cancel right before his appointment." She let out an exaggerated sigh. "You know what?" She sat up on her knees, unbuttoned her shirt, and slipped out of it. She lay back down with her bra still on, ass arched in black jeans.

"What the hell?" I said.

"You're going to give me a massage. I'm tired of doing it for other people. I've forgotten what it feels like."

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. It’s only weird if you make it—I touch people I barely know all day.”

“I doubt I’m any good.”

“Quit whining. Just touch me how you’d want to be touched.”

I went over to the tray and squeezed some oil onto my hands. Marita lay motionless. I started rubbing her shoulders. She unhooked her bra. I pressed my thumbs into the sides of her spine, made circles, worked down her body then smoothed my hands over her entire back. “Mmm,” she said.

I couldn’t concentrate. Marita’s hair smelled burned. She had tiny paper cups by the sink. Drank imitation coffee. Lived in a place where houses popped up from the skyline of evergreen like rows of sterile headstones. And her back had unfamiliar blemishes, was reddening beneath my hands. When I tried to imagine our bodies together, my mind recreated the room around us—all the candles and textured walls and cupboards filled with linens—but it ended there, without anyone in the room. Suddenly, Kate’s pitying face.

I wiped the oil from my hands onto my jeans. I just stood there for a few seconds, looking past Marita towards an erection-killing piece of wall art that said *HARMONY* in seashells.

She sat up, put her clothes back on. “How do you think I feel when you act more depressed than I am? Don’t you see how fucked up that is?”

“I’m sorry.”

Her eyes went glossy. She looked up at the ceiling and then back down at me. “I have some phone calls to make.”

I immediately regretted not having sex with Marita. So this is what I did—I went out every night trying to make up for it. It only made things worse, of course. The first girl I took home didn't make a single noise in bed, then fell asleep and twitched all through the night. The second fell back dramatically on her pillows after I came before she did. "Having a small vagina is a blessing and a curse," she said, sighing towards the ceiling. And the third had an ugly cat named Dina whose meow sounded like a distressed elephant. In the middle of fooling around the girl stopped and threw pillows at it. "Shut up, Dina!" she kept yelling.

I woke up in apartments that lacked all familiarity. Bathrooms covered in newspapers and makeup. Green Bay Packers drapes. A chalkboard that said "Make Art! Art is whatever..." In my mind, plaques made of wood and shells saying things like *BORING*, *PATHETIC*, or *EMASCULATED*, suspended in the air.

Worse. I still thought of Kate when my phone vibrated in my pocket, saw her in the beige panels of some rich man's garage door. I was just as foolhardy as Marita, who was probably out on some obscure island looking under bundles of driftwood for important debris. If Kate had died, I probably would have put her in a colorful urn shaped like a flower vase, *TO LIVE IS CHRIST, TO DIE IS GAIN* painted on the side. Why not? I was sentimental, after all.

I didn't see Marita for a few weeks, and then I was eating lunch on a customer's backyard gazebo when she came around the side of the house.

"I know the Petersons," she said, gesturing to the house behind us.

"I found seven dead birds in their attic today."

The sound of a leaf blower revved from the lot next to us.

"I'm going to the Peninsula tomorrow. I went last weekend, but I couldn't do it."

“Do what?”

She looked around, as if someone could have snuck up behind her. “Throw the urn into the ocean. I think it would help if someone came along. ”

I nodded, took a bite of my sandwich. “Why do I care?”

“You probably don’t. That’s why I’m asking.”

“Okay,” I said, “But I’m driving this time.”

On Saturday morning, Marita answered the door in a teal dress and simple cowboy boots.

“You look nice,” I said.

“I feel stupid, like I’m going on a date or something.” She slapped the sides of her dress as if to indicate how obnoxious it was.

I looked past her into the house and didn’t see any flowers. Moving boxes were stacked up in the living room. “Where to?” I said

“Downtown.”

“The city is probably better for single people.”

She laughed. “I’m not single, honey, I’m widowed.” She disappeared inside for a moment and came back with her purse and Roger’s empty urn.

I drove us back across I-90 and down through SODO to the ferry terminals. We parked and went inside the boat. It was lined with blue and white plastic seats and travel kiosks on each wall, most of which displayed brochures depicting an orca whale in some sort of cresting jump against a background of sailboats and evergreens. We went out onto the front balcony as the ferry disembarked. The ridges of the Olympic Mountains glowed sharply in the light of the

morning sun, and seemed to take up half of the available horizon. But when I looked over to Marita, she was just staring down at the opaque seawater crashing into the hull.

“He’d come out here by himself when we had fights.”

“What did you fight about?”

“The same thing every couple fights about—sex, money, time.” She let out a disappointed laugh. “I started this thing called *cabin therapy*. It’s a group of people online who share photographs they’ve found of remote cabins. Then they pretend they live in them. They imagine what their lives are like, alone and satisfied. That’s what I’d do when he’d leave. That’s what I was doing when he died.”

“My ex and I fought about everything,” I said. But when I really thought about it, there were a few events we always came back to. We skipped the thing before us and went straight to the pure form of one another’s deficiencies. Then we’d come to some agreement that such topic was solved or off limits. But it was never solved. It’s like there’s a false epiphany waiting at the end of every argument about the past.

I looked down at the rushing water, thought of what it would be like to go down there, at negative buoyancy, when the world starts to darken, and you float along in silence with the wolf eels, urchins, the giant octopus and six gill sharks, brushing hands against the phosphor. I thought about where Roger was, probably wound up in kelp forests or wedged between boulders.

The ferry pulled up to a shore of Bainbridge Island, past dozens of sailboats and eroded pilings. We got back into the car and drove through the dark green corridor of highway that stretched north to Port Angeles, then past it to the western tip of the Peninsula. When we got close, Marita took the urn from the back seat and put it in her lap.



“You know, Ben said that most of his customers are parents of teenage girls. There was one headstone I saw him working on of a girl who died after being flung off a horse. It had a depiction of her riding above her name, which was Anne something.”

“Did they make it look like the horse that killed her?”

“It was a silhouette, asshole. Anyways, what I wanted to say is that I think it’s nice as an *idea*. But people mourning are going to be capricious. He has this whole other room filled with stuff people decided they didn’t want. One headstone said *NIGHT NIGHT DADDY, SEE YOU IN THE MORNING.*”

“Now that’s morbid as shit,” I said.

We drove for a bit longer, then Marita told me to park before a trailhead with a sign for Neah Bay. She told me to carry the urn. On the trail we passed angular boulders and shore pines permanently slanted by coastal winds.

When we rounded the corner that put us in view of the beach, we both had to stop. It was crowded with people, some in reflective vests carrying big garbage bags. And slightly out in the water, past the pale bundles of driftwood, there was a sixty-foot dock that looked like it had washed up on the rocks.

Down on the shoreline, a man in a vest approached us. “You wanna register that?” He pointed to the urn.

“Register? As what?” I said.

“Well, if you found it on the beach, it may be flotsam that traveled all the way from Japan after the tsunami. That barge showed up this morning, and we’ve got all kinds of things. Someone even found a soccer ball with Japanese lettering on it.”

“No,” I said. “This is ours.”

“Okay.” Then he looked closely at it. “Doesn’t look like it would have a serial number anyways. Things are difficult to track without a serial number.”

“Any bodies?” I asked.

“That’s always the first thing people ask. There isn’t going to be bodies. Just the man-made stuff.” He looked around the beach at the people with metal detectors and those fishing in the waves. “Used to be people passed up debris,” he said. “Now they’re engaged.”

We had to walk down the beach to get to a place where it wasn’t so crowded, though there were beachcombers on every part of the shore. Eventually, Marita and I climbed up to a bluff. The wind whipped her hair, parting it over one side of her head. I tried to hand the urn to her but she pushed it away.

“You have to do it,” she said. “I’m worried I can’t throw it far enough.” She looked down at the people scouring the edge of the bluff.

I bent down and picked up a few rocks and deposited them into the pouch of the urn. Then I held it in one hand to feel its weight and took a few steps back. Before I threw it into the ocean—before we stood together watching the saffron glow momentarily against the charcoal blue—I remember admiring how Marita looked standing there with the entire country behind her, waiting for the urn to go flying through the air. And in the second she looked back at me expectantly, I thought of Kate. When it happened, Kate wasn’t any memory, something broken or leftover. She wasn’t a part of something I was trying to decipher. No positioning. No playing dress up. I was just seeing her as a person who existed somewhere else. Even though I saw her like that for just a second, it was enough to make me think I was the thing moving forward, and that others were drifting off, dissolving in a sea that stretched invisibly to another side of the world.

## GINGRICH

One day, Travis and Victoria decide that their safe word in bed should be “Gingrich.” At first, the simple fact of having a safe word is exciting for Travis, but then Victoria begins using it out of context. When he overfills her wine glass or runs too fast on their Sunday jog, she shouts “Gingrich!” and then laughs girlishly. It is humorous and clever of her to re-appropriate it in this way, but Travis begins to lament that this means the danger that requires such a word has been lost.

Then one night, they are riding the bus back to their apartment from Pioneer Square. It is the first Thursday of December, and they spent the night walking between impressionistic blobs, drinking red wine from clear plastic cups. Travis knows they are going to have sex. He decides to bring up the time they invented the safe word. “I think you should try to make me say it,” he says. They are sitting in the back of the bus in pale blue seats that smell like homeless people and French fries.

“Okay,” she says. She is smiling and looking out the window. Rain falls through passing headlights among the dark storefronts and hooded pedestrians.

When they get off the bus, they run through the rain back to their apartment. Victoria nudges Travis with her elbow like a soccer player vying for the ball. Eventually she uses her shoulder and knocks Travis into a juniper bush. He rolls out of the bush laughing, and then chases after her, but she has already raced through the front door.

Inside, Victoria has stripped down to her underwear and is standing in the bathroom doorway. She is half golden and shadowed by the dim lamplight.

“Honey,” she says, “I think I want to put you in a cage.”

“Okay. We don’t really have a cage, though.”

“Maybe we should buy one. I like the idea of putting you in one, then, I don’t know, letting you out when I decide I want to.”

“Well, maybe we can think of a makeshift one for tonight.”

Victoria looks around the apartment. She takes a few steps, and then opens the two-foot high door near the apartment’s entrance. Their building used to be a hotel for single men back in the 1920’s, where meals would be delivered through this small space the size of a dog kennel.

Travis comes up behind Victoria while she is bending over to examine the cabinet. He touches her back. “Hey there,” he says.

“Settle down. Now get in and don’t come out until I say so. You can’t speak unless I talk to you. Also, I think you should be naked.”

Travis takes off his clothes and crawls into the cramped space. He is surrounded by an extension cord, their old 12 inch television set, a couple mason jars filled with coins, and Victoria’s leather boots.

“Love you,” she says. She closes the door.

For the first twenty minutes, Travis simply anticipates coming out of the cabinet. He resists thinking about Victoria’s motives for leaving him there. As time passes, he listens to her bare feet on the wood floor. He hears computer keys typing, then the sink running in the kitchen, then the lamp in their bedroom flicking on or off. Cold air is coming from a crack in the plaster. After an hour he is no longer aroused, and all he wants is for her to open the door and invite him in the bedroom to sleep.

He will not say the word, though, because he wants her to let him out. He wants her to not be able to live with his absence. He finds a way to lie down in the space, and he curls up with

Victoria's leather boots. He thinks of how she wears fuzzy white socks underneath these boots, and how in the past he considered them tasteless and mannish. Now he decides they are just another reason to love her.

## CHRISTIAN ANARCHY LEARNING HOUR

I was not looking forward to taking my first theology class in college. I'm not Christian, and my high school was filled with the kind of people who believe dinosaur bones were placed in the earth by God to test our faith. In Sex Ed, we learned that STDs are made when two unwed virgins have sex, then we listened to Mr. Harmon berate birth control, explain how instead he puts his fingers in his wife a few times a month to see when she's ovulating. We watched an anti-rock and roll VHS tape called *Hell's Bells*, which explained how bands like Mercyful Fate backmask their recordings to brainwash teenagers. No one had ever heard of Mercyful Fate.

My high school was "non-denominational," which sounds harmless, but it enabled the faculty to be an A-team of bigots—people who had gone to Prairie Bible College, Baptist mission trips to Africa, written books called *Darwin on Trial* or *Serious Christians are Evangelical*. So, I'm happy to be going to a Jesuit university, and even happier that Wes, my theology professor, is not even Catholic. He's a Christian Anarchist. On the first day, he came into class and said, "There never was such a thing as Christianity." Alongside the Bible, we're reading a book called *Elements of Refusal* that explains how empire and domestication destroyed egalitarian village life. It says politics alienates us from creation. The cover of the book has a black background and the letters are blood red and bulbous, like a horror movie poster.

When we read the Bible, Wes focuses on how Jesus liberated the oppressed through solidarity. I guess any Christian would have no problem with that, but most don't define the oppressed as gay teenagers, Guantanamo detainees, or the homeless Native American guy who was shot to death by a Seattle cop because he wouldn't drop his whittling knife. They won't go lock hands with strangers in the rain and shout at Bank of America like Wes does. The Christians

back at my high school probably think of themselves as oppressed, or else when they hear that word, some vague image of a poor black kid insinuates itself into their imagination, then gets released.

*How long had you been in darkness, looking for a shape, the edge of some hopeful shadowed thing? Did you—as a sort of last resort—open your laptop and visit depressionchat.com, talk to a 24-year-old veterinary technician named Peter? Did you give Peter your address and did he send you “Combat Rock” and the collected poems of Allen Ginsberg? When you ate, was it black coffee and small bowls of fruit over which you poured ten packets of Splenda? When you made new friends, did you show them an old picture of your father? Was he holding you as a baby? When did your days begin to feel like one warped board getting nailed to another?*

This girl named Chelsea Williams died last Thursday. She didn't come back to her dorm room at night, and in the morning a janitor was cleaning the showers and found her dead body in there with the water still on. I've heard a rumor that her head was tilted back into the falling water, her hands clasped tightly around her knees. But I've heard so many things. How any of them could be reconciled with the fact that she swallowed an entire bottle of phenobarbital, then waited for her own death in the shower—I'm not sure.

I met her at a party, back at the beginning of the year. I was on my own in a crowded, foreign basement, barely able to move. She was beside me, pulling out her cell phone, looking unimpressed, then putting it back in her pocket. She did it three times, then turned to me.

“They call this the teddy bear room,” she said.

“What?”

“You know.” She ran her fingers across the wall, which was affixed with brown shag carpet. “It’s like we’re inside a giant teddy bear.” She showed her palm to me, now wet with some clear gelatinous liquid.

“That’s disgusting,” I said.

“No, *this* is disgusting,” she held up her plastic cup, then took a final gulp. “There was probably like ten rufies in that—If you rape me I’m going to be really pissed off.”

“Um,” I said.

“Sorry. Sometimes, I feel like I tell the truth so often that I end up saying things I don’t mean.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

It was then that she smiled at me, and tilted her head as if listening to something no one could hear but her. “Hold on.” She disappeared into the fray, but she never came back. I remember thinking it fit, that she’d be the type of girl to leave a party without saying goodbye.

Chelsea lived on the same floor as me, so I’d see her in the elevator, at RA meetings, studying in the lobby. I made an effort to say “hi,” call her by name, but we never talked again. She had wild red hair and a round face. She wore oval eyeglasses that tinted in the sunlight. Flowing black skirts and knee-high socks with multi-colored stripes. What I mean to say is that we traveled in different circles. Like, when my roommate Lawrence would say, “The odds are good but the goods are odd,” referencing the lopsided male to female ratio at the university, he was talking about girls like her.

The last time I saw Chelsea, she was walking down the hallway in lime green pajamas. I was waiting to wave, but she never looked up. Maybe she was just shy about how she was



dressed, or maybe she decided, ultimately, that I hadn't made any real effort to be her friend. So, what was the point?

Now it's Tuesday, and I'm going to Theology class for the first time since Chelsea died. When I try to imagine how Wes will respond, all I can see is the class sitting in a circle, holding hands and praying. I imagine this because that's what we did in high school after 9/11. We prayed, and then Mr. Bond talked about how the Seattle area was such a likely spot for the next terrorist attack. Think about it, he said. We have Boeing, Microsoft, Fort Lewis, large ports, a dense population. Then one kid asked if the victims who jumped from the top of the burning towers committed mortal sins by taking their own lives, and Mr. Bond said, "That's for God to decide." For a long time I had dreams of falling bodies, fleets of 747s nose-diving across western Washington like clusters of gigantic missiles.

But then I remember it has been almost five days since Chelsea died. We've already had RAs and counselors send us emails, knock on our doors. There are posters of Chelsea around campus, stapled over preexisting clutter, advertising a memorial for this weekend. I've gone to her Facebook page and her friends have written things like, "Hey girl, I had a dream last night that you were still alive and we went to a Japanther concert. Miss you."

Wes sticks to the routine. At the beginning of class, we sit in silence, concentrating on one person in our lives. Then we take out a sheet of paper and write questions to them. We do this because Wes strongly believes that solitude and meditation is how we find Jesus. He says the best theological questions are those addressed to people you know.

At first, I wasn't very good at asking questions. I'd just stare at Wes—his bushy beard, black-rimmed glasses, flannel shirt, busted tennis shoes, his thin grey hair lopsided by sleep. I'd think about how he doesn't look like a Christian at all; he looks like a poet.

But now I'm taking it seriously, and I think I'm getting better.

*Did you treat your life like a driver who forgets that she is driving? How many times did you have to jerk the vehicle out of the opposite lane? In American Drama, were you assigned "A Long Day's Journey Into Night," and did you write about the dope-fiend mother hugging her wedding dress and praying? Did you write an entire paper on the symbolism of that dress? Were you fascinated by the residue of a self? For how long had you felt like you were already locked inside of a dead body, and when did you decide that the only option was to kill the only part of you that was left?*

After another minute, we turn our paper over and begin to draw the biggest, most perfect spiral that we can, not taking our pen off the page for any reason—it keeps us from looking up. This is when we can share our questions out loud. It's always quiet for a moment, but then the disembodied voices come, like someone's in another room, slowly flipping channels on a TV.

*Do you really think that book you're reading is helpful, the one that talks about the five love languages?*

*Are you back in Michigan thinking about me, staying awake at night and waiting for your phone to light up?*

*Is it just that you don't feel like making the right decision, even though you know what it is?*

No one mentions Chelsea, and I think that maybe I'm the only one in class who knew her—but I just sit there, moving my hand slowly until my spiral is complete.

Then we discuss a passage from the Bible, and when we get to a part where Jesus threatens to send someone to Hell, Wes stops reading and says that word—hell—was originally “Gahenna,” which actually was a valley south of Jerusalem where thieves and sexual deviants went. It's interesting how Jesus wasn't talking about a fiery afterlife, and was more so just telling the Gentiles to go suck a bag of dicks.

For the rest of the day, I think about what I wrote. I am drawing the spiral, hand shaking. I go study, eat at the cafeteria alone and feel like shoving my face in my chicken alfredo. And when I get back to my dorm room, I think about the beginning of the year, when Lawrence arrived with a big TV, a handle of vodka, and a rack of DVDs. We lofted our beds and invited girls over to watch movies. We made cocktails. I remember thinking *I have arrived*. But now Lawrence drinks during the day, cooks Spam in the microwave, has a semicircle of dirty clothes and mangled textbooks around his bed. He's addicted to this role-playing game on the Internet and now I fall asleep to the faint grunts of ogres, clanks of swords, the sounds that seep through his expensive headphones.

*Did you drink a bottle of wine with your roommate and then climb out a 12<sup>th</sup> floor window onto the small awning of an 11<sup>th</sup> floor balcony? And was your roommate yelling for you to come back in, and did you lie on your stomach and stare down at the dumpsters and people leaving the Ethiopian restaurant on Broadway? Afterwards, when you were required to see a campus counselor, did you say “decline” to every question that she asked? Was this something you learned to do at age 14, when you went to a women's clinic to get birth control for your*

*unmanageable periods, and on a piece of paper, under the question “Have you ever been forced to have sex” you wrote “yes?” Did the nurse come back in and say, “You’re going to have to change that answer or else we have a lot of paperwork to do.” Did she tell you to erase it? Did she tell you to write “decline?”*

In class on Thursday, we are talking about the difference between the religion of Empire and the religion of Creation. Almost immediately, Wes gets that look in his eye like some professors do—like we’re all still there but made of glass, and he can look through us. He explains something that happened to him last summer. He went down to Seafair, which is this festival I associate with people running marathons and jets flying over the city all weekend. But Wes says it’s a celebration of Empire. Not only that, but it occurs on the same weekend of Hiroshima-Nagasaki. So Wes went down to Elliot Bay, got on a Battleship people were touring, then reached into his coat and started throwing bags of pig blood everywhere. He spent a night in jail.

He explains again who crucified Jesus. How religion changed after Constantine. Empire, he says. It is the economy of scarcity. It is patronage. It teaches us to treat enemies with contempt. It is propaganda. Empire is memorizing Bible verses without actually understanding them. But the religion of Creation is direct experience. And then he says it again—*direct experience*—with two definitive hand chops. He rushes over to the podium and grabs his Bible. “Genesis 1:27,” he shouts. “God created all of mankind in his image.” He tosses the book back down. “If you learn anything from this book, it is this—how far does your love extend?” We are waiting for him to say more, because it’s a question and not a lesson, but then he points to the clock. “We’re two minutes over,” he says, and everyone packs up and walks out into the mist.

*On the day you killed yourself, could no one have predicted the mood you were in? Did a calm come over you after you decided how and when? When someone asked how your day was going, did you lift up on the waistband of your jeans and say, "Either I'm allergic to high-waisted pants, or the fence on 12<sup>th</sup> and Harrison I got these from is not as clean as I thought." Did you smile, then adjust your backpack, then continue on your way to class?*

On Saturday, I walk across campus alone to Chelsea's Memorial. It's an unusually bright day, so people have swarmed every patch of urban grass. I've never been inside the campus chapel before, but I know some famous architect built it in the 90's. It's a modern stone box made from a mix of mustard-colored stucco, glass, and metal, with oblong windows protruding from the roof like skybound hallways. Outside, there's a reflection pool big enough to be mistaken for a reservoir.

Inside, I take a seat in a pew in the back row, and watch a group of men play acoustic guitar hymns near the altar. Each part of the room is separated into color fields by the slanted skylights, as if inside different colored glass bottles. I'm in blue, and the men up front are orange.

Eventually the music stops and a young woman steps up to the altar. She waits a moment for everyone to sit down, and then she looks up into the orange light and says, "You know, it just fits—that this would be the one sunny day in March. Because that's Chelsea. That's who she was." It turns out the woman is Chelsea's sister, and she talks for a bit about a foundation the family has set up in her name, and she tells a story about being little and making Chelsea bring the TV into the closet at night so she, Suzanna, could get her beauty sleep. Everyone laughs.

Then she trades places with a young guy in a vestment called Father Jerry. He's a pretty young and liberal sermonizer, because he uses a few curse words when talking about the difficulties of premature death. He says that asking why someone killed herself won't do us much good. She's gone now and that's what we need to deal with. Then he wraps everything up with the mother of all clichés: "We don't always understand God's plan." That phrase always seemed a way to make someone's grief or frustration illegitimate. As if saying that all the meaning in the world can't be heard, like it's some dog whistle that God blows down upon humanity for no fucking reason.

Afterwards, I decide I can't be on campus anymore, so I walk down to the waterfront. The doors to every shoe store and coffee shop and bar are open, and the workers are wiping everything down, and people are holding hands. I pass the buskers at Westlake Center, down to Pikes Place, and I watch men throw salmon like footballs. I walk into the sculpture park by the water, sit down on a bench, and take out *Elements of Refusal*. It makes me feel anonymous and adult. By then, the sun is setting behind the mountains, and the bikers and joggers on the trail in front of me look shadowed and one-dimensional.

When I would tell people I didn't believe in God, the most popular response was this: How can you explain the beauty in the world without God? They'd reference something like sunsets or cherry trees. It's like people think if they invent a new form of stupidity, someone might mistake it for truth. I should have told them to tell me what they see, not what is there. To stop making arguments when they should be describing a feeling.

*Alone, in your room, while your roommate was at a student council meeting, did you swallow the pills then think it might take too long, that she might come back and see the*

*annihilation in your face? Was it like you had jumped off a bridge at night and were falling towards black water in slow motion? Is that why you left, and walked down the hall with no towel in your hand, and took the stall at the end of the corridor? Who were the girls showering beside you? Could you smell lavender and cucumber? Or did everything taste like you had been zipped up in a plastic bag? If there's nothing out there beyond this life, is it nothingness that kills you, and is it nothingness that accepts you and makes you into itself?*

When I get back to my dorm room, Lawrence is in there with about six other people. He's wearing a gold leotard and gigantic wayfarer sunglasses. There's some guy in a ripped denim jacket and girls with side-ponytails and leg warmers. They are listening to Madonna. One girl, who looks like an 80's pirate wench, falls on Lawrence's bed and says, "God, I just want someone to take advantage of me!" She kicks at Lawrence when he gets close to her.

I put down my backpack and lean on my desk. "You guys look like a bunch of idiots," I say.

"We're all going to the 80's dance in the student union," says Lawrence.

"What about people who don't like to dress up and dance? What do you think they're doing?"

"I don't know. They could be doing anything. Why should I know?"

"It's just something I've been thinking about."

"Here." Lawrence puts down a pitcher on my desk, which is filled with some green liquid. "That's the rest of the vodka Red Bull. Find some 80's clothes, drink that shit, and meet us there. We're already late."

When they leave, I pour myself a cup of the drink and look through my closet. I find a pink polo, which is about as 80's as it's going to get. I put it on and look in the mirror. I'm flushed and sweaty from walking around all day. Pink is not a good color. I dump the vodka Red Bull into the sink and walk out into the hallway.

I don't know where I'm going. It's Saturday night, but no one is around. There's no music or shouting or people running around. I walk past the elevators, and then I'm standing in front of Chelsea's door. There's the poster for the memorial, which has a picture of her sitting at a stone table in a field. Then there are others. She's beneath the Eiffel tower, hugging friends in a driveway at night, pressing her face into the mane of a golden retriever.

I keep walking, and end up by the women's bathroom. I knock on the door like the male janitors do, and no one responds. Inside, I walk past the rows of sinks, the toilet stalls with the unfamiliar little trashcans, and then I'm looking down the corridor of empty shower stalls. There's one at the far end that's blocked off by some caution tape. I rip down the tape and step inside. I take off all my clothes and turn the water on. When it gets hot enough, I crouch down, and sit on the cold tile. Once, Wes told us his favorite passage in the Bible is when Jesus is walking through a crowd of people with his disciples, and he stops and says, "Who touched me?" His disciples tell him that's a crazy thing to ask, but then he points to some woman who touched the hem of his garment. He says the woman had faith in her touch, and so she is healed. I close my eyes. I put my arms around my knees. I tilt my head back into the water, and I wait.

*Is it like being trapped in one of those old screen savers, where you float through a sea of homogenous stars? Are you still out there, even as some small thing? Are you some unstudied particle at the end of time, moving farther, ensuring that the universe is always getting bigger?*



*Do you still tell people your favorite animal is the shark and that you hate Jack Kerouac? On good days, do you read on the city bus until you're at the edge of King County? Can you see everything at once, and does it feel like that time you went back to your hometown, and all the woods of your youth had been bulldozed, made into dentist offices and strip malls? Are the ancient stories the only ones that are true? Are you still waiting for someone to ask a question that will rip you open like the box of light you know you are, but you have no idea what that question is? Or is there still no one around who loves you enough to ask?*

## THIS IS GREAT BUT YOU DON'T NEED IT

You find happiness beside a food truck on Pike and Broadway, while you are waiting for the tacos you just ordered. It's an illogical type of happiness, the kind that has no object, as if a net that smothered your thoughts has been chewed away, and now your attention can turn outward. So you decide not to go home. You carry your tacos to the park to eat them with yourself—which, you decide, is not the same thing as eating them alone.

So you walk, and you keep finding what the happiness is. You think: it is the plum blossoms. It is the dogs carrying leashes in their own mouths. It is how your blood feels powerfully sober. It is a group of people at a bus stop who all stand on their toes, lean over the curb, together catching sight of their bus, which is just now coming down a hill.

So the next morning, you are in line for coffee when a nanny for some rich Microsoft family walks in. She's holding hands with a toddler. A few minutes later, she offers him banana chips and he swings his entire arm across the table, scattering the chips across the floor, at the feet of about twelve customers. You marvel at the Frankenstein-like way the toddler doesn't know his own strength. And then, before taking her latte off the bar, the girl pulls her hair across a front shoulder and dips toward it to sip the overflowing foam as if drinking from a water fountain. She straightens and smiles at you with her whole face. You decide to ask her out on a date.

That night, you both walk through snow flurries, to a bar that has transformed with the weather, feels like a ski lodge. The girl orders whiskey. When her hair dries out, it looks iridescent from the bar lights, like a frizzy halo. She gets drunk with you and tells you about writing suicide notes to her parents when she was only six years old, about an ex-boyfriend who

had to take all his clothes off anytime he took a shit. You think: this is fun. You think: I am learning.

One of your friends throws a brunch party. His house is a big faded triangle with bicycles and damp people oozing from the doors. You eat waffles late into the afternoon. A strange guy with hair braided into pigtails—someone’s co-worker, probably—interrupts a group conversation. He says, “Man, I don’t believe in power. All power is just inferiority, anyways.” No one responds. The whole room is silent, and one friend is holding a pillow to her chest and smiling at the ceiling. You decide that all of you, together, are making the world a better place with that silence.

These days, you rarely check your email. You are not signing onto Facebook to look at pictures of “Ashley and Justin’s rustic barn wedding.” You are not wishing for the things people always do. You are not jealous of the couples wearing sweat pants in Trader Joes, buying falafel mix for dinner on a Friday. You do not even want a volatile lover inconsistent with your own nature. And when you look in the mirror, you do so only long enough to decide that you are balding with dignity, though just a few years ago you would not have considered that to be possible.

The Microsoft nanny asks you out to lunch, to a restaurant that only serves Pho and cream puffs. After squirting plum sauce into her “medium veggie,” she tells you she has contracted a skin disease that, while treatable, is painful and semi-contagious. It will be two years before she can be sexually active. You’ve only been on one date, so you can’t be sad. She takes you into the bathroom and pulls down her pants to show you the red dots spreading around her thighs and torso. *Molluscum Contagiosum*. She got it from swimming in a hotel pool. You

walk her home, and saying goodbye feels like practice for the other times you'll have to leave someone else, for when it will be much more difficult.

So you walk alone until dinnertime, and by then all the brick apartment buildings and Victorian mansions have their lights on. Tenants are painting at their kitchen tables. They are putting everything in drawers. They are smoking too much weed and spending hours reading about the Illuminati. They are poised on living room rugs, performing stretches that will help with sciatic nerve pain. They are not the type of people who think that, at age 26, if they haven't found someone to "be with," that they might end up alone. They do not pretend that there can be a plot for their happiness. They know how feelings that never change are lies.

It ends while you are asleep. Your mind discovers that there is no reason for your happiness. It's not that your subconscious reviles that emotion—it's just that, from a certain angle, happiness looks like something you don't need anymore. So it gets released, and in the morning you sit in bed, laptop on thighs, staring at previously read emails. You get ready, but the longer you look in the mirror, the more you have to stand in front of it. And on your walk to work, all the blinds are closed. Attractive strangers are smug. You want to care about the plum blossoms, but you don't. You try to see them falling around you like pink TV snow. You try to see them as they were. But what you are doing is this: you are reaching out into the world to find happiness again, but it's one of those things that wouldn't be real if you could touch it, that wouldn't be worth much if it could be chased after leaving.

## SEASIDE

Paul was on the couch, tuning my guitar. He doesn't know how to tune a guitar, so he was just tightening the E-string. I had already told him to stop once. The string was making that high pitched crackling noise, then it snapped. So I slapped him across the face. For a moment, it was funny—the way he gasped and cupped his reddening cheek with his palm. Then he stood up. I ran into my room, forgetting to turn the lights on. He came in and punched me in the stomach. So I put my hands around his neck. Then he put his around mine. We were on the bed, doing that to each other. I could still kind of breathe. I knew he could, too, because he said okay turn on the lights turn on the lights turn on the lights.

We were fighting because three months earlier, Paul mounted a camera on my dashboard. He said it was just an experiment—it was art, he said. We were on our way to Seaside for a camping trip. But then I went to one of his art shows at the graduate school and there were five car simulators with fake steering wheels, speakers, and TV screens. And people were sitting there, driving fake cars, watching the Oregon coast go by on their screens, and listening to me talk about masturbation routines and why I'm afraid of earthquakes.

That was Paul. He neglected important details. Sometimes it made him look cavalier. Other times, like controlling our intimacy got him off.

So that's why I was mad. When I confronted him, he just said the exhibit was well received. That I could try to be more supportive. Art does not apologize, he said. Then he broke my guitar string. And we fought. And I actually felt a little better—I don't know why.

Two months later, I was part of one of his projects again. He was making a plaster mold of his dick, and he needed to suck me off to stay hard long enough. When the plaster dried, he'd

slide out and there'd be a cast of his hard-on. He was going to make a mold of his face later, maybe attach one of the cocks to his forehead like some kind of dick-face-unicorn-mask.

I knew at the beginning that I wouldn't feel comfortable with it, but I agreed anyways. I didn't say anything until three of Paul's attempts were clustered on his drafting table like beer bottles, and he was beneath me, struggling to make a better version.

So I told him to stop. I said I didn't want to be involved anymore. I said that although the molds were of his dick, I was the one making him hard—so they were kind of not his dicks.

He stood up and asked what the hell he was supposed to do now. He pointed at the dicks. He grabbed one and threw it at me. Then he grabbed another and broke it over his knee. He was still naked, holding each end of the broken mold like the opposite ends of nunchucks.

When I said his project probably wouldn't sound so smart once he blew his load anyways, I knew what would happen. If Paul was a bull, he'd be the type that sprints past the matador and lunges into the bleachers. He lacked focus. He fought for the sake of it. But me, I knew I wasn't going to fight back that time, and things were going to be different afterwards.

After we broke up, we tried to keep in touch. I even went to his next art opening. Walking up, I could see there would be tons and tons of dicks. Hung up like wind chimes. Like Christmas lights. There were even a few of the masks he told me about. People were trying them on.

When I saw Paul, he had another guy following him around. The guy was young, probably an undergrad like me. A camera dangled around his neck. When Paul introduced the two of us, he only gave the guy's name. Didn't say where they met, what the guy did. Didn't say who I was, either. I could almost feel the two of us trying to be who we were and not being that.

When I left the gallery and I drove home, I remember looking past my empty passenger seat to Puget Sound, where the water was black and empty against the fog. And I started thinking about Seaside—about the exhibition Paul made out of our trip. I thought about how it must have felt for strangers to sit in those car seats and watch the scraggly pixelated shrubs and the cliffs dropping off into the blue ocean, to listen to some guy talk to his boyfriend. It must have felt special, like being told a secret and being able to exist in the space that secret creates. It must have felt like I felt then. It must have felt pretty good.

## CASCADIA DON'T FALL APART

On the third night after Leslie's roommates leave for separate vacations, she looks up from her computer and sees a person outside her bedroom window. At first she thinks it's her own fuzzy, faraway reflection. But when her eyes adjust, she realizes it's a man. He is leaning on her side yard fence beside garbage cans and gangly rhododendrons. He is fat and curly-haired and there are three circles of sweat on his t-shirt in the shape of Mickey Mouse. After a moment of eye contact, he only leans farther over the chain link fence. Leslie stands up and twists the mini blinds shut, but that makes her feel worse. When she peeks through them, he's gone.

She locks all of the windows and doors, starts to call the police then hangs up. Minutes later, she's in the laundry room by the back door. She's rummaging for makeshift weapons when the locked doorknob turns slowly from left to right. She's holding a hammer that came with an Ikea shelving unit.

Then the doorknob remains still for a long time. She concentrates on it too hard, starts doubting if it really moved. Later, she's on her bed scrolling through contacts in her phone. She can't call her parents. They would freak out, probably demand she live at home for the rest of college. She doesn't want to bother anyone, actually. What could they do now? She stays up all night with the lights on, watching a big shadow fail to appear on her wall.

In the morning, Leslie packs a bag, walks down to the train station, and buys a one-way ticket from Seattle to Olympia on her credit card. She waits until the train starts moving to call Matt.

"I thought we weren't talking," he says.

"This is the end of that."

"Sure seems like it."



“You didn’t have to answer, you know.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“So, are you able to pick me up?”

“Sure, but I’m out in the field today. I hope you don’t care about your clothes.”

“I’ll be fine,” she says—she’s wearing black jeans, a purple hoodie, and Chuck Taylors.

The train is passing a litany of marshes. Mt. Rainier looks like it has grown farther up into the sky.

It has been three months since Leslie broke up with Matt. They dated for a year until he graduated and got a job in a city sixty miles south. At first he visited on weekends. But things changed with him at her house, sleeping in her bed and waiting for her to finish homework. He became simple. He only wanted what she wanted. It bothered her that he used her shampoo. Out at her favorite restaurant, he had said, “I wish I could just buy this chipotle mayo, you know?” Looking at him was like regarding a paper cutout that only appeared to have three dimensions.

But that was three months ago, and those moments of frustration and apathy have been floating away like bad dreams. Lately she has been wondering if her love for him is just matter of position, an angle she was merely jostled out of—one she could probably find again.

Matt is waiting in the parking lot at the station, leaning against a white truck that belongs to Thurston County Planning and Land Services. He wears a dirty white t-shirt with a stretched-out neck, green cargo pants, and combat boots. His hair used to be long but now it’s buzzed off, enhancing the masculine contours of his face.

“That’s a big backpack,” he says.

“Do you have company or something?”

He smiles. “Nope.”

They drive through forested roads to an empty church outside of town. Matt parks in the back by a dense thicket of shrubs and willows. He puts on a vest filled with flagging tape, charts, and small paperwork in plastic bags. They take turns applying bug spray, then he unsheathes a machete and starts hacking away at the wall of foliage.

They spend a few hours traipsing around the perimeter of a wetland. Matt hangs flags on trees, reads from his soil charts. He tells Leslie the scientific names of plants. He gives her a chance with the machete and teaches her how to hold it between her forefinger and thumb. He does not say he missed her. He doesn't bring up the last time they talked. When they get back to the truck, he stands outside, pulls out two cigarettes and lights them. He leans against the passenger door.

“What made you come down here?” he asks.

“I just had this feeling—I needed to see you.”

“When do classes start?”

“In five days.”

“Do you have work?”

“Tomorrow night.”

Matt seems unmoved. He is still holding the machete and he tips its blade in and out of the sunlight as they finish smoking. Leslie compares this image of him to one from three months ago. They had been video chatting late at night, but were typing since Leslie's roommates were asleep. He wrote *I miss you* and leaned in too close to the camera. His frown barely fit on her computer screen.

They drive to Matt's house, which is a small rambler on Black Lake. Several generations of satellite dishes are bolted to the roof. The grass out front is overgrown and out back there's a

moss-covered dock that juts out into the water. Inside, every appliance is half-broken. There are vagrant cats, random scraps of lumber, and store bought paintings of blue herons and dragonflies. Matt isn't halfway done with the tour when they start kissing and grabbing at each other. It feels hasty and good.

On the bed, Leslie asks what they are going to do without her scarves. Matt acts surprised even though that was how they used to do it. He leaves and comes back with a few belts and some rope. He ties her up, then takes a long time to do anything. He's kissing and touching and talking to her.

"I'm tied up," Leslie says eventually. "What are you going to do?"

"Depends. How long are you staying?"

"Forever," she says. And then he gives her what she wants.

Afterwards, they eat dinner and go to bed early. Leslie wakes up from a nightmare of the fat man at her door. She thinks she's at home until she rediscovers Matt's bedroom. She goes to the kitchen for a glass of water. Out the window she can see onto Black Lake. The water is so placid and reflective that she can see all the stars in it—like some superterrestrial hole that could swallow everything.

The next day, Matt takes them out to a wetland in Lacey. They drive a mile on a foggy dirt road and park when vine maple starts thrashing the windows. There's a trodden path leading in. They find a car muffler, a deflated soccer ball, and lacy underwear half-submerged in the muck. Matt says he's found dead house pets wrapped in plastic. He's found meth labs. Barrels of chromium. He says it's amazing what people will throw into mud if they think it will never come back.

After lunch, they go to the county office, which is a remodeled K-mart in the suburbs. Inside, a labyrinth of cubicles. Matt's desk is littered with maps and pictures of pear-bodied birds. A poster of fish with the subtitle *I like what I'm Herring!* A co-worker stops by and talks to him for a long time about taking a developer to court. It occurs to Leslie how vivid and comfortable Matt's life is now. He seems better without her and she finds herself wanting to go to that place with him.

Her boss calls that night. When her phone lights up, she recalls the small shirt she has to wear that says "Smoothie Girl." She thinks of the men from Gold's Gym who come from across the street who want extra protein in their shakes, who stare and linger. They read out loud the Anne Sexton quote tattooed on her forearm, but they read it like a question. *I have been her kind?* She lets the phone ring and go to voicemail.

Three days pass, and Leslie is still in Olympia. When Matt has office work, she stays home reading. She catches intermittent sunlight on the dock. She walks down gravel roads that get swallowed by forest or extend to large houses. When Matt is out in the field, he takes her with. He teaches her how to read soil charts and which animals are endangered. The lines of foliage he cuts with his machete seem carved out at right angles, like laurel hedges trimmed by gardeners in gated communities.

One afternoon, they are investigating an embankment that slopes down into an estuary. They have a view of the Olympic Mountains to the west and Mount Rainier to the east. Matt is describing how the headwaters flow down into stream corridors and bogs, then discharge into the delta.

“Do you know about Cascadia?” he says. “It’s a group of people who think Washington and Oregon should secede from the rest of the states. They say it’s the only bioregion strong enough to never fall apart.”

When Leslie asks him what makes it strong, he talks about global warming and peak oil. Hydroelectric and geothermic energy sources. Associative governing models and social safety nets.

When he’s done, Leslie has a difficult time responding or adding. Eventually she says, “So, in an environmental disaster, you don’t think Cascadia would fall apart?”

He stops and puts his hands on her waist. “If everyone wanted it to stay together?” he says. “No, I don’t think it would.” He leans in to kiss her.

“You fucking dork,” she says. She shoves him and he trips over some tree roots. She goes to help him but he pulls her down. They do it there half clothed on the globuled weeds and snarled vines. Afterward, they lie on their backs looking up through the diaphanous leaves of overgrown blackberries and willow trees. They start saying that they love each other again.

The first day of classes comes and goes. Work has stopped calling, but she gets an email from the professor in charge of her honors thesis on *Beowulf*. Her roommates are back and are sending her text messages. She feels guilty for not telling them about the fat man, but the fact that no one knows is starting to give her ownership of the event, something she can carry with her, feel the shape of when no one is around.

Then it’s Thursday night, the end of the first week of school. Leslie stays awake in bed thinking of long walks to campus in the mist, the professors who know her, nights in the library working on her thesis. She has decided to write about the scene after Grendel’s mother attacks the mead hall, when Beowulf stands over the lake she lives inside. Leslie is fascinated by the

way Beowulf can't see beyond the water's reflective surface, how it's the moment just before he dives in to pursue the female monster.

At breakfast the next morning, she tells Matt that if she is going back to school, she has to do it this weekend. Matt starts referencing an idea Leslie presented a few days ago, one that she's starting to regret—she could un-enroll from fall quarter.

“I don't know about that anymore,” she says.

“Okay. Maybe I move up to Seattle with you and start my own consultation business.”

He's doing that thing where he puts his palm on the top of his head while he speaks.

“But you like your job here.”

“It's just an idea.”

“I think I need to go back.”

“So we do the long distance thing.”

“Okay,” she says. But she has already drifted off. She can see Matt leaning over the breakfast table at her, the condensation on the bay window, the coffee cup in her hand. But everything looks farther away than it actually is, like she's seeing it through a backwards microscope.

Matt has office work, but Leslie goes in with him anyways. He's in meetings most of the day, so she stays at his desk surfing the Internet. In the afternoon he comes back and says he got a call about a violation.

They take a county truck out towards the upper Deschutes. They are on back roads between patches of timeless-looking forest when Leslie starts to feel oppressed by the fecundity of the area.

The GPS puts them on a new asphalt road with a rock waterfall and a wooden sign that says “Cedar Estates.” All the houses are pressboard skeletons bustling with construction workers. Eventually there’s a cul-de-sac that looks out onto a field of sawdust and a man operating a gigantic yellow excavator.

Matt fidgets with the paperwork in his vest. “They motherfucking filled it,” he says. “You don’t have to get out.”

“No, I’m coming.”

When Matt asks who’s in charge, workers point to the excavator. Matt walks up and stands beside it until the operator acknowledges him. The guy is toad-faced, frowning. He’s wearing a navy fleece jacket and a barely scuffed hardhat. “Yes?” he says. He doesn’t get down, doesn’t turn off the machine.

“You’re in violation of a critical area ordinance,” says Matt. “The wetland you just filled is a protected space.”

“Well, it’s on our land.”

“That doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want to it. You’ve already inundated another property by displacing the water.”

The man shakes his head, puts his hands back on the controls, and the arm of the machine jerks and dumps a load of dirt onto the ground. Then he turns it off and looks back at them. “Are you still here? I have work to do.”

“Not anymore,” Matt says. He pulls a form from his vest. “I’m writing you a cease and desist order. If you keep working, you’ll hear from a prosecuting attorney.”

While Matt starts to fill out the form, the man locks eyes with Leslie for the first time. He looks her up and down. “What’s your little friend doing here?”

“That doesn’t concern you,” says Matt.

“Yes it does. She’s on my jobsite, after all. Is she a biologist or something?”

“She’s standing right here. You don’t have to make me speak for her.”

The man takes another long look at Leslie. The air is charged. She can sense him playing with her in his imagination.

“What are you doing here, honey?” He says it like he’s talking to a child.

“I’m a biologist,” she says.

“No, you’re too young and pretty to be a biologist.” The man smiles and shows his small, rotten teeth. “I can tell—you don’t even have one of them fancy vests.”

Matt rips the notice from its pad and takes a few steps towards the excavator.

“No,” says the man. “I want her to give it to me.”

Matt ignores him. He climbs the side of the machine and hands over the paper. The man folds it, puts it in his mouth, then turns the machine back on.

On the way out of the development, Matt stops the truck and points to the wooden sign. “Cedar Estates,” he says with disgust. “That’s the joke around the office. Developers like to name their property after whatever they’ve just destroyed.”

On the way back, Matt rants about restoration fees and taking the developer to court. He bemoans rapid suburbanization, endangered species, fragile ecosystems. “I’m sorry about that guy,” he adds.

“It’s fine. Men have just been treating me like that lately.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. Just being harassed since I hit puberty.”

“No, you said *lately*.”



“Well, this guy kind of tried to get in my house before I left.”

“What guy?”

She tells him everything—closing the blinds, the chrome doorknob turning, staying up all night, the way each time she remembers the fat man, he’s even more fat. He’s gotten so fat that his skin has started drooping away from his face like wax melting before a fire.

“You mean someone is planning to sexually assault you?”

“No, I mean I saw a guy looking at me.”

“Bullshit. I just listened to you explain how he freaked the hell out of you. How could you keep that to yourself?”

“Maybe I don’t think it changes anything.”

“Well, it does. You can’t go back and live there.”

“I have to.”

They crest a hill on the highway and can see past the soggy bowl of the countryside to the mountains in the distance. Leslie recalls their previous conversation about Cascadia. She can’t help but think the opposite of what Matt said is true—that what holds the world together is not any kind of devotion to an idea or togetherness, but the ability to see what has already fallen apart.

They treat that night like all the others. They eat dinner and have sex and watch a movie. Matt doesn’t ask her anything about plans. There are few moments making dinner, smoking on the porch, holding a cat, when he looks at her with a hesitance that she finds harrowing. It’s like he doesn’t know how to be comfortable anymore. It’s like he is waiting before a closed bathroom door at a house party, afraid to knock because he has seen some strange light coming from beneath.

Leslie is sitting on the couch when he disappears outside for half an hour. He comes back and tells her to put some warmer clothes on. He takes her out to the dock and steps onto the rowboat he's cleaned all the sludge off. He rows them out to the center of the lake, then hangs up the oars. They are sitting on opposite ends of the boat.

“What is going to happen to us?” he asks. She can only see his silhouette, but it is clear his shoulders are folding into his torso, his jaw is clenching.

She doesn't know how to answer because in her mind she is already packing her bags in the morning. She is waking up before Matt and calling a taxi to take her to the train station. She is imagining how it will be sunny when she gets back to the city. How the busses will be crowded with beautiful people not talking to each other. Her neighborhood will not look gentrified during the day, not even the men smoking on collapsed porches, the barred storefronts next to brand new condominiums. She will stand at the top of Cherry Street and see past campus to the yellow-lighted skyscrapers, and she will regard it like a place capable of loving her and knowing her name.

What happened in Olympia won't fully sink in until weeks later, when she'll be standing in the hallway of a college house with a boy. They will be at an “Apocalypse” themed party. There will be zombies, vintage gas masks, glow in the dark food. There will be three *Mad Max* costumes and a guy out front with a stolen shopping cart telling people he's the father from *The Road*.

Leslie will be propped against a wall, and the boy leaning too close to her will be named Jimmy, and Jimmy will ask her what kind of apocalypse she's most afraid of. He'll ask her like it's an intimate question—one he has saved for her.

But that is not what Leslie will want to tell him about. She'll want to take him to Olympia and show him what she saw when she looked into Black Lake that night. At first she'll want him to see the reflection of the cold vivid stars like enraged corpuscles. She'll want him to see blind subterranean fish, green sludge. But then the water will start to swirl like an inverted tornado. He'll see sawdust, meth labs, needles, car parts and dismembered wildlife. He will see the western pond turtle (extinct), the peregrine falcon (endangered), the great blue heron (endangered), the great horned owl (monitored), the pygmy rabbit (extinct), the bald eagle (endangered), the townsend bat (threatened) and the island marble butterfly (endangered). He'll see the face of the fat man superimposed on the garbage and stars like a constellation. The man will be so fat by then, he'll be a bloated moon, something hovering in the sky while Jimmy sleeps at night. And before everything will swirl into the black morass, Jimmy will be on the boat with Matt and hear what he asked. How his voice strained to make it sound hopeful, like a real question he couldn't answer himself. She'll want him to hear the way it echoed off the mountains that hemmed them in on all sides. She will want to take him there, to that precise moment, and show him the end that already exists.

### CONFABULATION, DAY 4

I remember Emily coming back from the family service center at Fort Benning with a purse full of brochures. One was called “The Challenges of Deployment,” written by Dr. Bruce Bell, who warned me in the first sentence that saying goodbye to my wife wasn’t going to be as romantic as I imagined. “The list of opportunities for crushed hopes is a long one,” he wrote. I remember feeling upset that the army would assume romance is the troll of my imagination, not fear.

Then the deployment ceremony came. Emily hung on me after a kiss, her shoulders flexed against the straps of her purple tank top, and the Georgian pine forest behind her bristled in the exacting sun. Saying goodbye was easy. Saying goodbye was romantic. I’m trying to decide if that means Dr. Bell was wrong, or if he successfully managed my expectations after all.

Now I’m on a Boeing C-17 that just refueled in Leipzig, Germany. I’m sitting in containerized seats with 105 troops. We are almost to Afghanistan, and I’m more worried about that goodbye than ever. I’m wondering what happens when I start to envy my own past—I’m already doing it.

I got an email three days ago. Emily attached a picture of herself beneath a statue of Paul Bunyan in Minnesota. She’s there with her family until driving back to Seattle. Snow is everywhere, reaching the tips of Bunyan’s gigantic wooden boots.

Right here, Rossman is talking about the Pashto commands we learned in pre-deployment training.

*Wadarega*—stop.

*Laasuna porta kra*—hands up.

Rossman asks me if our accents are too thick. He says he wonders if we'll just end up pointing our rifles at people who don't understand what we want.

Rossman and I were battle buddies in basic training. We have already carried casualties out of kill zones. We have been distorted in the eye portals of each other's gas masks. We have gone without food for days. We have camped in sandy firebreaks. We have agreed that unwashed fatigues and a diet of MREs causes men to smell like paint thinner.

There are no windows on the plane, only fluorescent lights sharpening the grayness of our uniforms. When I imagine looking beyond the cargo hull, I see the western Himalayas. They are so clear I can see the snow-veined peaks, and the worn trails created by slave trade in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In reality, even if I were seated in the cockpit, I'd only see white clouds thrashing, maybe intermittent glimpses of greenery or boring sea. When I eventually see the Himalayas, I'll be on the ground, and they'll be tan blobs in the horizon.

In 2009, when I told Emily I wanted to join the army, we were about to graduate college. She said we should go all out for the cliché: marriage, a dog, a kid. She's the kind of girl who drinks an entire soda while shopping and pays for the empty bottle at the end. We found a minister on craigslist who performed the ceremony beneath the cherry trees on the university quadrangle. We paid him fifty dollars. His name was Bart and he wore an old fisherman's vest. When he stumbled over "lawfully wedded" we all laughed and Emily kissed me early.

Before I decided to enlist, choices regarding my future were hard to make. I'd stay up at night thinking. I'd imagine myself in the Peace Corps playing soccer with Cameroonian families. Or going east for some kind of artistic graduate degree. Or staying in Seattle to work at Half Price Books with my brothers. They all sounded like ways to end my life, not begin it. In the

morning I'd discover that I brought the milk into the bathroom and left it sitting there on the sink counter all night.

But then I decided to enlist, and even the smallest choices glowed with exacting lights of clarity and purpose. I scored in Category 1 on the military aptitude test. That meant I could write my own ticket to any job. Desk job. Navy. Working in nuclear power plants. But I only wanted to join the infantry. That's what I had decided. That's what it would be.

When I told my brother, he quoted Plato, then didn't talk to me for weeks. "Only the dead see the end of war," he said. I don't come from a military family. They had trouble understanding that I wanted to look out of place brandishing an M4 Carbine. I wanted parts of my body to become nearly hairless from starched uniforms. I wanted to stumble through marches with my fists tight and arms straight at my side. I wanted to be at the airport in Seattle with the other recruits on our way to Georgia, fully clad in our fatigues, having taken the wrong skycab to our gate, arguing about missing our flight, me just having talked Litzgow out of snorting hot sauce from Manchu Wok. I wanted an old woman with cauliflower hair to interrupt us, to place a hand on my shoulder and say *Thank You* to all of us. And I wanted to not be able to say *You're Welcome* in that moment because I hadn't done anything worth thanks yet. And I wanted to feel that soon, I would.

In 2009, Prince Harry implored his army bosses to return him to the front lines. A British newspaper reported shortly thereafter that Harry's head finally appeared to be screwed on straight.

"Left, *face!*"

Our plane lands at the airfield in Bagram. There is no sound except jet engines, so I can't speak to Rossman. Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines from around the world are thronged in tents and containerized buildings. We sleep in wooden shacks called "B" huts.

I'm half awake, thinking of Emily's black shirt—the one that's transparent in the back so you can see the two dimples above her perfect ass. The shirt is real, but I scare myself by realizing that such a pang of lust creates imaginary context: me behind her, walking down a street in a neighborhood that doesn't exist.

A procession of things in fours. Four squads to a platoon. Four years of experience needed to lead a platoon. Four forms of Military. Four stages of training before deployment. Four days since I've seen Emily, each one distilling memories into dreams.

When Emily and I moved into an apartment off base in Fort Benning, she started feverishly documenting her life. She started a blog for all the things she drew and baked. She bought a new camera phone. Haircuts. New furniture. Anything that could be was categorized and thrown on the Internet. When the baby comes she'll post the circumference of its head on Facebook. Of course the things that try to fill in the gaps of experience won't, but what I worry about is whether or not they'll end up making reality even more foreign, even more not there.

The military is mostly a present-tense operation, like how the training force blasted mosque prayer music whenever we simulated raids. They turned it on in the middle of the night, at times waiting for us in dark corners wearing hijabs. I can't stop thinking that some day, years later, I might be running up the stairs in a library and swing a hard corner into a woman in Afghani garb. What about my training then?

In the morning we set out in a convoy of Strykers to Al-Qualat. Bagram ripples and shrinks behind us. We pass several caravans of nomadic tribes that look like something out of

biblical times. Loaded donkeys, walking women and riding children. Following some distance behind are men and boys, herding sheep.

Then there are big busses called “jingle trucks” that are decorated with shiny objects that glimmer through the tan grime of desert. They are topped with bags of grain, farm supplies, and, at times, small cars that must have been lifted on top with a crane or forklift.

The opinions I have of the future are determined by the things people tell me about it. I will clamber off the back of a truck in pursuit of the Taliban with Afghani soldiers. The Afghani soldiers will be wearing flip-flops, speedo eye goggles, and New York Yankees t-shirts. We will repair a damaged fender on the truck using mud to weld the fiberglass together. We will call an air strike on a secret base camp surrounded by emerald grass—a geological freak accident. We’ll sleep on worn mats in smoky huts.

I haven’t talked to Emily in four days. I imagine her driving back to Seattle on a Wyoming highway, pregnant, our German shepherd in the front seat, whining out the window.

In my wallet there’s a laminated photograph of Emily kissing me on graduation day. I’m holding my rifle in one hand, and embracing her with my other. My short-rimmed military cap is askew. Her skin is darker than I’ve ever seen it—she’s a quarter Native American, but the Seattle winters tended to pale that fraction away.

Now I can’t remember whether that kiss occurred before or after graduation. Then I admit I never knew which kiss it actually is—there are too many.

When I look close enough, I can see pixels indicating that there’s a space between our lips, and so it’s not clear whether in that moment I’m pulling her towards me, or putting her back down, her once kicked up leg lowering back onto the asphalt someplace in Georgia I’ll never see again.



I'm thinking of all the events in my life that once happened for the first time, and how currently they are happening for the first time again, and that later they will be happening again, and then again. I want to know how they will look.

## BACK TO SUMERIAN TIMES

The man emerged from a busy street corner on Belmont and Pine. He called for Brandon by his name. He was imperiously dressed—trimmed beard, leather boots, a grey pea coat, and a paperboy cap. He was so tall he had to duck under the wide umbrella of a hot dog vendor.

Brandon had just left the theater, and the buzz of his performance made the nightlife seem docile. People trickled out of bars with drunken motility. He had been walking swiftly back to the dorms, hardly cold in a t-shirt, carrying his fencing sword by its sheath.

“I’ve gotta say it,” said the man when he caught up. “You should have been Romeo.”

“Thanks, but I’m just a freshman. They give the biggest roles to juniors and seniors.”

“A freshman? Well god damn. I loved the sword fighting. How you acted like juveniles. Getting in fights. Making mistakes. You didn’t overdo the love story—that’s key. Best *Romeo and Juliet* I’ve ever seen.” The man paused, then waved a finger at Brandon. “But you’re no Tybalt. I can tell. They probably made you grow that goatee and shit, and they got you real buff, but you’re a Romeo if I’ve ever seen one.”

The man folded the program into his breast pocket, said his name was Simon. They began walking together.

“I’ll get right to it,” said Simon. “I’m a casting agent for Overture films, and I’ve got a movie part for you.”

“Really? What kind of movie?”

“It’s an indie film. Let’s see, how do I explain it—you know the first emperor of China, the one who built the great wall? Well, he also ordered all the books written before his rule to be burned. He wanted his reign to be insular both physically and historically.”

“Wait, so the movie is about a Chinese emperor?”

“No, Jesus Christ. Listen. The protagonist—the part we want you to play—explains this at the beginning of the film. He says love is like that. Like, in every relationship he’s the emperor. The rest is vignettes. Little scenes. You seen *Annie Hall*? *Blue Valentine*? *500 Days of Summer*? Shit yeah, you have. It’s like that. To fall in love is to create a religion with a fallible god. That’s the theme.”

Brandon pictured himself in front of a chroma key, jazz playing, reciting a philosophical monologue on love. “Do you have the script?”

“Where, in my back pocket? Shit, kid. Terry Stones is working on it right now. You heard of him?”

“Well, no. Can’t say I’ve heard of Overture Films, either.”

Simon smiled. “That’s all right,” he said. He seemed to be looking at Brandon and past him at the same time. “If you’re skeptical about the film, that’s fine. I’ll take you to see the one we have playing first. I’ll buy you dinner. Ever been to The Tin Table? Didn’t think so. I’ll take you there after and we can talk.” He handed Brandon a business card.

They had crossed Madison Avenue and Simon paused by the stone sign of Seattle University. “Well, goodnight, I guess,” said Brandon.

“Yeah, goodnight. You’re an amazing actor. You want the part. You want to do something artistic. For now, I promise to be the most well-behaved stalker you’ve ever had.” Simon ran back into the road. He seemed to be hailing a cab that never materialized.

Brandon walked back to his dorm. His roommate was gone. He took a shower, then stood in front of his vertical mirror in his towel. He unsheathed his sword and practiced his maneuvers, staring at the reflection of his toned muscles. Then, he lunged forward and stabbed through the

half-inch space between his wardrobe door and its hinges, like he did with Mercutio's armpit, barely nicking the sides.

But when he slid into bed, there was a swell of piano and snare brushstrokes, the swiveling cameras, and him alone before the screen, tasting brilliant metaphors in his mouth like love as the great wall, as the terracotta army, and as all the history books afire.

After the Sunday matinee, Brandon entered the lobby of the theater in costume to greet some friends. He immediately saw Simon walking towards him. "Ah, furious Tybalt, alive in triumph!" he said from across the room. Following him was a husky man with short grey hair, wearing a green nylon coat. "Let me introduce you to Terry Stones."

Terry shook Brandon's hand and rolled his eyes. "You're definitely a young Tybalt."

"It was a *directorial* choice," said Simon. "They're tracing the paradigm of adolescent behavior, you shit. He's supposed to look young." Then he reached out and gripped Brandon's shoulder with his palm. "You know, it's funny. Every brilliant guy I've known has really broad shoulders. And look at this, Brandon here looks like a goddamn upside down triangle. A guy with shoulders like this can stand his ground. To move is to stir and to be valiant is to stand."

"You can stop quoting the play now," said Terry.

Brandon was about to thank both of them for coming. He wanted to ask Terry some questions. He had looked up Overture Films and found small media company based out of Louisiana. But a few friends interrupted, shaking his hand and tugging at his costume.

The two men left and came back. Then Simon stepped in front of Brandon. He was whispering. "Terry here thinks I should have told you to fuck off. You know, he's doing Q & A

for our movie at the film forum tonight, and I dragged him here because I think you have what it takes.”

“Who says I want the part?” Brandon lied. He didn’t want Simon to think he could be a bully. “And what’s with Overture Films being from Louisiana?”

“Louisiana is where we were last filming. Quit trying to be precocious, kid. For chrissakes, you were the one who said they don’t reward talent around here. Why? Because academia is *bureaucracy*. Get in the film scene, if you know what’s good for you. Here. Here’s a ticket for our movie tonight. It’s called *Trashmen*. If you don’t come, then good luck in the University Theatre.” And with that, Simon walked out of the foyer with the pale Terry behind. Was he dragging an injured foot?

Brandon took a seat in the theater by himself. There were a dozen other people in the auditorium when the movie began. The seating was tiered, but they sat in mismatched chairs from school classrooms rather than theater seats with cushions.

The movie opened with various actors dressed up like old men and women. They wore drooping plastic masks, sweat pants, and white tennis shoes. They walked through suburban streets at night like a gang, screeching and kicking at each other until discovering dumpsters and trashcans. Then they took turns humping the trashcans violently, screaming in ecstasy as porch lights turned on and dogs barked from behind fences. The movie continued with more old people violating trash, though sometimes the cameras would follow them back to their homes, where they would tell dirty jokes or read passages from the Bible by a fire pit.

At the end, the man who had taken Brandon's ticket came to the front of the theater and introduced Terry. Terry dragged himself in and scowled. There was an awkward pause until an audience member asked about artistic intent.

"My intention," Terry said, "was to create a movie that might as well have been something found in a back alley dumpster."

It seemed a sufficient answer to Brandon. Even if the goal was unreasonable or odd, he thought the film had achieved it. He imagined a VHS tape forged by stench, darkness, refuse and even some kind of playful evil. But when Terry continued to speak, Brandon became lost in phrases like "primordial consciousness" and "technical apparatus." He wanted desperately to understand the movie, but instead he found himself thinking of the people in it. In addition to the ones in costumes, there were bystanders and even a child alone in a playground that had spoken directly into the camera. He struggled to determine if they were actors or real people.

Simon was in the lobby after the talk. "Hey, Romeo, you like the movie?"

"I liked it. But I think I need a minute to think about what it means."

"Think about what it *means*? Good movies don't have meaning, kid. Don't worry, our next movie will be more accessible. Beginning, middle, end. That sort of thing. Hey, you hungry? I'll take you out, buy you a steak. Better than that dorm food you've been eating."

They walked across town through a cold mist. All the sidewalks and storefronts that weren't black shined a dim yellow. Brandon held onto the thought of going to a fancy restaurant. He was going to be offered a part in a movie. He was going to be in that warm yellow light with someone important. Suddenly his hometown in Eastern Washington and his high school plays seemed from another life. Now he had Simon. He had leverage over the anonymity of a big city, and he considered the likelihood of getting famous before graduating college.

They went to The Tin Table. It smelled like rosemary and meat. The bar was backlit with blue neon. Salsa music crept in from a ballroom across the spacious hallway. “Don’t even open up the menu,” said Simon, reaching across and closing the one in Brandon’s hands. “There’s no sense in getting anything but steak.”

“Where is Terry? Is he going to join us?”

“I’ll be honest. Terry might need some convincing that you’re right for the part. He’s wary. Wary Terry. We’ll win him over, though. You did good coming to the movie tonight.”

“So what are we doing here, then? I thought we were going to talk about the script.”

“Hey, kid, I’m the casting agent here. I know what I’m doing. You think I’m foolish? I went to Harvard. I’m Ivy League. I went for film and women’s studies. I’m the real thing.”

“How was it, going to Harvard?”

“Well, for starters, I graduated during a terrible recession you aren’t old enough to remember. Here, you want to order some wine?”

“They might ask for my I.D.”

“Pardon me, shit. I forgot about that. I’ll tell you this. I’ve got wine at my condo. We’ll go afterwards. You know those condos by the park? Look like two big cylinders? I live in those. We have a pool. A balcony. The works. Terry might even be there. You could bring your sword and dazzle him with some fencing maneuvers.”

“I don’t know. I have a Latin test tomorrow.”

“Hey there, smartypants. What’s it on? Noun declensions? Passive Periphrastic? I studied Latin in the seminary. I wanted to be a priest. Can you believe it? I didn’t last, because I happened to be one of the great sexual beings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here, translate this for me: *id faciendum est.*”

“This has to be done.”

Simon lowered his fork onto his oblong porcelain plate. He had an astonished look on his face. “See, you don’t need to study. One glass of wine.”

“Maybe another time.” Brandon felt he was being strong. He thought of how easy it was to deny Simon. The man was so confident that it gave Brandon the power to dismiss him, to appear uninterested despite the fact that he was. He wanted the part, but he knew that displaying his eagerness for it was the wrong thing to do. It made his chest swell with a feeling he could only guess to be importance. It was something he had not felt before.

Brandon did not see Simon for three days, and he caught himself looking for the outline of his massive torso in the audience as the play went into its second week. He found Simon’s business card in his wallet, and was about to call, but then Simon was there, sitting on a bench smoking a cigarette when Brandon got out of stage combat class. He wore slim designer jeans, grey tennis shoes, and a rainproof jacket. He was leaning back with one arm extended over the top of the bench.

“How did you know I have class here?” Brandon said.

“I just know where to be, kid. You think I have time for espionage?” He chuckled and rolled back his head. “Hey, I want to tell you. The script is almost done, we’ve got a few other actors lined up, and I’ve been doing some work on old stubborn Terry. Things are pretty definite. You busy this afternoon?”

“Why, do you have a copy of the script?”

“Well, I was going to give it to you there, but if you’re going to make me ruin the surprise, yeah. I got it. ”



Brandon hung the sword around his shoulders, then swiveled his waist playfully.

“C’mon, Romeo. I parked down by the chapel.”

It was noon, but the heavy morning fog had not lifted. They walked through the quad where limbs of the bare cherry trees were black against the sky, like a photonegative.

“I need to be back for another class at four, I just remembered,” said Brandon.

Simon drove a Chevy Tahoe with leather seats. His head came up to the roof, and they listened to loud, aggressive electronica. They drove down Denny Way towards the condominiums. The low hanging fog obscured the bases of the buildings so that the cylindrical tops looked like they were floating mystically in the clouds.

They parked in a basement garage next to other luxury cars. The concrete was slick and new and clean. They took the elevator up to the top floor. Simon threw his keys onto a long coffee table and disappeared into one of the back rooms, telling Brandon to make himself at home. As he wandered the living room, he could see the imprint of his shoes on the thick white carpet. There were large ferns and a showcase with plates and a blown glass sculpture of a pink flower with cherubs fused to the petals. Beyond French doors, there was a balcony with concrete stairs leading down to a steaming swimming pool, and beyond it the dark blue Puget Sound, flanked by a cruise ship and a wake of white foam.

Simon came back into the room displaying a thin document like it was something from a jewelry case. “Here it is, the first scene. Read it over and don’t show anyone. Don’t let it out of your sight. The rest is coming later. You understand?”

“Why can’t I have the whole thing?”

“You mean why won’t I hand over a 100 page manifesto to an amateur actor? You see that glass sculpture over there? That’s a Dale fucking Chihuly. This is money. This is Terry

Stones. You think theater is a profitable business? Bullshit. It's *movies*. You'll get the rest when you've earned it."

Simon was standing over Brandon, holding out the script. He smelled of fragrant pine and new cloth, like a shirt off the rack of an expensive clothing store. For a second Brandon thought maybe he should be more cautious, that maybe he should have told his roommate where he was going for the afternoon, but after another look around the ornate penthouse, he grabbed the papers and put them in his backpack.

"You don't say a whole lot, Brandon. I like that. It's all about your actions. Me, I end up talking all the time. Our feelings are so damn complicated, and then we try to represent them by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals. It's absurd, right?" He had led Brandon across the room and was opening the doors to the balcony. The air outside was thick with mist and stagnant. He lit a cigarette and handed it to Brandon.

"Sorry, I don't smoke."

"You don't smoke? That's rich. Aren't you an actor, saucy boy?"

"Yeah, one who can run long distances and sing." Brandon was staring at the steam from the pool. He didn't like how Simon seemed to be lecturing him earlier, like he was young and untrustworthy. He wanted to prove himself, to throw it back in his face.

"All right, Mr. Physical Fitness," said Simon. He walked slowly down the steps, flung his cigarette on the peach-colored concrete, then stripped down to his boxers with his back turned. He went to the end of the diving board and then turned around with his heels off the edge. He smiled at Brandon and smacked his hands together. "See if you can top this," he said, then performed an inverted dive, his lanky arms and legs flailing a bit before entering the water.

When he surfaced he shouted then went floating on his back. “Your turn, Brandon. Bestride the lazy puffing clouds and sail upon the bosom of the air!”

Brandon stripped to his boxers and mimed unsheathing a sword. “Tis he, that villain Romeo!” and he ran down the stairs, up onto the diving board, then he leaped forward in a front flip, tucking his knees to his chest before splashing into the lukewarm water.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” said Simon. “Living the actor’s life. Let me tell you. You are lucky you got talent. Lucky I snatched you up.”

Up beyond the balcony, Brandon saw a flash of a woman in jeans and a red bandana. “Who is that?”

“Hot damn, that’s Mia, the maid.” Simon waded to the deep end of the pool then began shouting her name. She came out to the balcony holding a rag, and when she saw the clothes she shook her head, collected them, and then hung them neatly over the railing.

“Mia, baby, can you grab two cold ones from the fridge? You don’t have to hand them to us. Just throw them into the pool.” The maid sighed and came back with two beers. She tossed them with a limp wrist into the pool and went back inside.

They lounged in the shallow end and started drinking.

“You really are a beautiful young man,” said Simon “You’ve got the looks, is what I mean.”

“Thanks, I’ve done some modeling.”

“I’m not surprised. Jesus, look at that jawline,” and then he reached over and cupped the side of his face.

Brandon shook it off. “What the fuck, dude. I’m not gay, you know.”

“You’re not gay? That’s the funniest goddamn thing I’ve ever heard! Aren’t you studying drama at a fancy liberal arts college? Don’t they have you reading Gore Vidal, Judith Butler, all that shit? Heterosexuality and homosexuality—they’re just social constructs. Haven’t you learned that? That’s the first class you take at colleges like yours. *How to put your queer shoulder to the wheel*, 101.”

“What I’m saying is I don’t want you to touch me like that. Besides, if I was going to be with a guy—I could do better.”

“So the gloves come off! Okay, you entitled mannequin. You’re right. I’m *sorry*. But let me ask you something. As a hypothetical, okay? So far I’ve bought you dinner, got you a part in a movie—a lead role in a movie—and what have you done for me? What? You’ve got a Terry Stones script in your backpack, for fuck’s sake.” Simon sighed and slid down in the water a bit.

“What if I said you wouldn’t get the rest of it unless you did a *favor* for me?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Ah, don’t act all prudish all of a sudden. It would be a favor. Sometimes you need to go beyond the limits of desire to get what you want. It’s a trust thing. I’m not going to make you do anything. We’re artists, okay? Just think about it.”

Simon tried to take a nonchalant sip of his beer, but Brandon stared at him.

“Aw, hell. Don’t act like I’ve upset you. You’re going to have to give back something to be an actor. Trust me, it’s a good deal for you. Just try going down to Los Angeles. Talent don’t mean shit there. Young actors like you have to sell their souls for any old part—hell, to play a guy in a commercial who is comfortable with his herpes. I didn’t realize you’d be so old-fashioned, so conservative.”

Now it was Simon who wouldn’t look away. He had a hurt look on his face.

“Are we going to do some filming here?” asked Brandon. “This place is amazing.”

“Just wait for the cast parties.”

They drank their beers and took turns reciting lines to the balcony, where a few times Mia reappeared, thinking they were calling her. Before they got out and drove back to campus, Brandon dove to the bottom of the pool and turned upwards. He opened his eyes and looked up into the sky. There was no sun or light dancing on the surface of the chemical water, just vapor rising into the grey sky, and for a moment he was nowhere, forgetting even that he was underwater and would slowly suffocate if he did not return.

Brandon read the script once during philosophy class, then again before going to bed. He assumed he was playing the part of Jack, the protagonist. In the first scene, Jack is in a bookstore arguing with his friend about a girl who was murdered. A girl found lodged in a kiln at an abandoned cement facility. The friend blames Jack, says even if he didn't physically kill her, his obsession did. They keep referencing a *Him* who killed her. After the argument, Jack goes beneath an abandoned pier to meet a half human, half gargoyle with a pulpy, octopus-like face. *I've come to ask you to sway another mind*, Jack says. The scene cuts. We go back to the beginning. We watch Jack brood with lust over a girl at the bookstore. We suspect it's the girl who was murdered.

That's all Simon had given Brandon. He was perplexed at first, even a bit disappointed. He had dreamt the movie to be more romantic, depicting farewells on house porticos, soaked hair kisses, the crimes and misdemeanors of love. He wanted tracking shots of conversations on the yellow streets of downtown. He wanted comic breaks of fourth wall.

Then he told himself it wasn't a play, especially not Shakespeare. It was a movie. Things would come alive on the set. Besides, it had mystery. A dead girl in the first scene. He mentioned that he was making a film to his friends. One of them had even heard of Terry Stones, and said that he produced a horror movie about a New Age cult that starred Tori Spelling. Brandon ordered it online. He called Simon, who told him to come by to talk about scheduling. He almost couldn't wait for *Romeo and Juliet* to end.

On Saturday afternoon, Brandon walked through downtown towards Simon's apartment. He carried his fencing sword because he didn't know how long it would take, and he had a performance in the evening. Sunlight reflected off the white sidewalks and ached in his eyes. He was thinking about the favor. He hoped that ignoring it might make Simon too embarrassed to ask again. But what if it did come up? Anyone who knew Brandon would tell him not to do it. They'd say he was being manipulated. They'd say he'd pay the price for it later. And what would that price be? He wasn't sure. They'd be speaking about it as if they had done it themselves when they had not. Maybe it would be bad for someone who was scared, someone who wasn't strong. But Brandon wasn't really scared. He was young and resilient and emotionally balanced. Besides, he of all people could decide what was a fair trade.

While thinking, he almost lost his way in the crowds and glistening traffic. People at bus stops flicked cigarettes into the street. Tourist families spilled from department stores with lavish paper bags. Tall buildings were decorated with the bare skin of billboard models that looked his age.

“What do you think, Romeo? That old Terry sure can write.” Simon was across the coffee table in a dining room chair, straddling its latticed oak. Fuzzy afternoon light came through the French doors and illuminated specs of dust behind him.

Brandon took the script from his backpack and tossed it on the coffee table. The document slid surprisingly fast across the polished wood until the paperclip unfastened and pages spilled in disorder at Simon’s feet. He hadn’t meant to do this. He almost got up to gather the pages and apologize, but he didn’t. “The script is okay, I guess,” he said, leaning back to sink into the couch. He had this odd desire to be smoking a cigarette.

“It’s okay? You’re damn right it’s okay. Just yesterday I told Terry I thought it was his best piece yet. A real masterwork. Jesus.” Simon started picking up the papers. “You need to learn some respect, kid.”

“The way you explained it at first. I thought it would be different. With the monster and stuff—it’s pretty weird.”

“Let me guess. You thought you’d be playing this romantic hero. Some introspective guy whose always getting the shaft, until one day some troubled chick comes along. Et cetera. Et cetera. People fall asleep watching that shit. You need mystery and danger. You need people in real trouble. And it’s not a *monster*; it’s an appropriation of a H.P. Lovecraft character. Didn’t you get the reference?”

“I didn’t mean I thought it was bad. It just surprised me, is all. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, don’t be sorry. To be repentant for an act is to modify the past. Leave that to the Jesuits, okay?”

“Whatever. So, when are we going to start filming? And do you have the rest of the script? I want to know what happens.”

“Of course, yes. Let me tell you Brandon. The script is done. The movie is funded. We’ve done some casting. You know we got the girl playing Blanche at the Rep to play the dead girl? Hell yeah we did. Imagine a young Vivien Leigh with poise and a drink in her hand. Well here’s the thing. Look at me, I’m even nervous to bring it up again. I think you need to hold up your end of the deal first.”

“What deal?”

“Oh Christ, don’t play dumb. You’re going to make me spell it out for you? You’re a beautiful guy, Brandon. A fine specimen. This can’t be the first time you’ve been propositioned. And it won’t be the last if you want to act.”

“I think you should give me the rest of the script first.”

“The rest of the script first? Can’t do it, Romeo.”

Brandon stood up. He threw back his shoulders. He had pushed himself at the gym the day before and liked how his sore muscles tightened against his skin. His sword fell from the couch to the floor. On instinct he kicked it up with his foot and caught it by the handle.

“Now don’t be dramatic. Sit down and put that toy away.”

“Give me the fucking script and I will.”

“The fuck has gotten into you, Romeo? With love’s dark wings did you o’erperch these walls?”

Then the front door creaked and in came Terry fumbling his keys. Boxes of Chinese food in a plastic bag dangled from his left wrist. He stopped at the threshold and looked at the two of them.

“Simon, I told you not to start without me, you son of a bitch.”

“Shut up Terry. The kid’s freaking.”



Terry tilted his head towards Brandon with condescension. “Oh, that’s cute. You think you’re Zorro or some shit?”

“Terry, shut the fuck up. He wants the whole script first.”

Terry walked across the room and put the bags of food down. He opened a paper box and chomped an egg roll in half. “So give it to him. What difference does it make? You said you want him in the movie.”

“It’s going to his head already. Just look at him. Remember Whitfield? Fucking Whitfield?”

“Well, it’s clear you are scaring the shit out of this kid right here. Did you forget what a big son of a bitch you are? When you wear street clothes it just screams sexual aggressor. Put on a goddamn scarf or something.”

“Thanks, Terry. I don’t get reminded of stereotypes often enough.” Simon turned to Brandon. “Is that what this is about? You think because I’m not Caucasian I’m gonna jack you?”

Brandon studied Simon’s features. His large brown eyes and pale skin. He didn’t look even slightly ethnic; he looked like a blank sheet of paper. “I’m not racist, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Terry threw up his arms and stomped down the hall. “You’re gonna make me solve all your shit, aren’t you?” He went to a back room, then came back with two documents and sat on the couch next to Brandon. “Hi Brandon.” Terry shook his hand. “Here is the rest of the script. It’s funded in part by Overture Films, which I own, and in part by a subsidiary of Mirimax. You heard of it? Mir-I-max. Now here is your contract.” He slapped the other document down. “Read through it later, but you’re entitled to a few bucks up front, then later depending on how much the movie rakes in. Now are you willing to do what it takes to start your acting career?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Good.” Terry stood up and walked across the room.

“Good man,” said Simon. “You’ll learn that hardship is an aphrodisiac. That’s Romeo and Juliet, for chrissake. That’s Pyramus and Thisbee. That’s Troilus and Criseyde, and every love story back to—well—back to Sumerian times.”

“Jesus, could you put a sock in that bullshit for just one minute?” said Terry. He pulled a camera from a cabinet and splayed the screen out to the side. “Just some diagnostics. Tell me your name.”

“Brandon Peterson.”

“And how old are you, Brandon?”

“Eighteen.”

“Eighteen. My god. Well, Mr. eighteen-year-old Brandon. Would you mind standing up for us?”

Brandon stood up. He pretended to hesitate. When they asked him to take off his shirt, he gripped the fabric on his shoulder, acting too shy to take it off. He felt comfortable, but he kept that to himself. And he hid the smatterings of confidence within when he looked beyond Simon to the glimmering pool and yellow skyline, to the future artists and Off-Broadway actors gesticulating around the pool, to the skinny women in lingerie, and across the city to his roommate back in the dorms, studying calculus or coming back from the cafeteria with plates of food to eat in front of the television, and the way Brandon felt something like pity for him. And there he was naked and they hadn’t even touched him yet.

He felt lucid, unfastened, like he did when deep in a role. He grabbed himself. “So, are you guys coming over here? Or are you going to stand there like a couple perverts?”

Brandon was halfway back to campus when he realized he'd forgotten his sword. But he kept walking up Pike Street. He would need to borrow another sword from the prop closet, and it might have a different weight he wouldn't be used to. It didn't matter. Besides, the fact that it didn't matter is probably what separated him from the rest. He felt good. He would command his role as Tybalt one more time, and then, in Terry's movie, he would command his role in that too.

Then just before the skyscrapers of downtown gave way to boutiques and dark coffee shops in brick buildings, Brandon waited at a cross walk. Against a plaza hung a billboard of a young model before a white background. She wore heeled boots, mini-shorts, and a translucent shirt. One hip was locked to the side, which made her legs look graphic and too long. She was pale. She had a gap between her front teeth.

"Looks like ugly is the new pretty," said a middle-aged woman on the curb. She was a straight-haired blonde wearing a white baseball cap and Nike running shorts. She smelled like an empty plastic container of something. When she walked away alone, Brandon realized she may have been speaking to him.

He stood there for a moment beneath the model. He did not agree. The model was not pretending to be attractive; she didn't have to. It seemed to Brandon that your flaws are no longer relevant if your picture is emblazoned on the side of a downtown plaza. What you look like. What you gave to get there. Strangers can insult you, but they're insulting an image of success. The fact is that you were chosen to be right there, peering down on the city, half-naked, piercing green eyes, blown up twenty times your original.

## REMEMBERING BUD

My dad and I get to the house at 6am. When we see the big ugly satellite dish in the front yard, we remember it has to go. It's ten feet tall and six in diameter, oxidizing with rust, aiming skyward without purpose.

"That's your first job today," he says. "Finally take that puppy down."

We go inside. For a moment I look for the socket set, but then I spot the big reciprocating saw in the kitchen. I take it outside and make an angled cut at the base of the dish. The blade screeches and sparks on the metal. When it falls like a cherry tree and crashes on the river rocks in the garden, I'm sure I've woken up the entire neighborhood. Today I don't care.

With some difficulty, I drag the dish across the yard and up the driveway to the junk pile in the garage.

Inside, my dad is already grouting the tile in the bathroom. He doesn't see me at first, and I take the opportunity to study his face. I am looking for signs of hurt or obliteration. But it's just him. Sweat-sullied bandana wrapped around his forehead, bent on kneepads, swiping the floor with a grout float like it's a painting he's pleased to wipe away.

Our goal is to finish the remodel today, but I'm not really thinking about that. I'm thinking about tomorrow, when my stepmom will drive my dad up to Seattle Cancer Care Alliance for his first day of chemotherapy. And I'm thinking of a lot of days elsewhere in the future.

When I arrived in Tacoma three days ago, it was the first time I saw my dad since the diagnosis. I expected serious talks. But so far he's only spouted off life-affirming clichés. He has referred to his oncologist as his new best friend. He has said, "It will all be over before we know it" without acknowledging the double entendre. The result is I have nothing to say, not even "I'm

here.” I’m too baffled. Somehow, he’s experiencing a catastrophe to which he already has the archives.

Now we’re out in the living room. He is taking kitchen cabinets out of cardboard boxes. He is laying their parts on the new carpet and telling me how to assemble them, where they go. While he’s talking, I pull out my drafting pencil and label the boxes from A to F. Then I write the corresponding letters on the kitchen wall where the cabinets will hang.

I’m bolting together the first cabinet when a song called “Down with the Sickness” comes on the radio. I change the station. “Your Body is a Wonderland” comes on and I give up.

The cancer is a soft tissue sarcoma in what we’ve been calling my dad’s “upper thigh,” but the tumor is really in his ass. They cut into it two months ago to remove a sample tissue. One sign he might actually be tormented by what’s happening is that he hasn’t made any “cancer is a real pain in my ass” type puns, which at first was the only comedy I expected him to find in the ordeal.

When all the cabinets are assembled, hoisted in place, and leveled with shims, we take a step back. We judge their alignment by how directly the can lights glow on the varnished wood and un-christened appliances.

I think about how he typically does all of this by himself. He eats four eggs with toast in the morning, takes 40 milligrams of Adderall, then works through lunch to the explosive jingles of hard rock radio.

I go outside and power wash the driveway, hang light fixtures, sand and paint the front door. I’ve done this with him enough times that I can find something to do on my own. When I was younger, I spent most of the day just watching. I remember him framing walls and my job was finding true two by fours. I’d go out to the pile, grab a board, and point it at something. It

didn't matter what I pointed at—the shed, a ladder, him—just as long as what I held did not warp along the way.

My dad is not the kind of parent who asks for help. If a task is neglected, he just does it himself in a flourish. He can load a dishwasher with remarkable ease—the plates and forks flung like garbage into a can. So I've always had the chance to offer my help, to seem autonomously good rather than reluctantly obedient. But in the past few years I've failed at that. Honestly, I'm down here because my stepmom called and told me to volunteer. We both let my dad believe I did it on my own, I think.

We move from finish work to cleaning. I slurp up errant screws and scraps of drywall with the shop-vac. My dad loads up all the tools in the truck, makes a trip home. Before he's back, I go out to the garage. The satellite dish is in there with wood scraps, fast food wrappers, nail gun casings, and Gatorade bottles filled with piss from before the toilet was installed. My dad pulls into the driveway and we look at it together. Suddenly, this is all we have left to do.

“I'm going to come see you more often,” I say.

He laughs, opens up the truck bed. “Not going to be much to see.”

I stand there, trying to look serious. But he walks into the garage and grabs the base of the satellite dish. “Poor Bud,” he says, then looks back at me. “That's short for Big Ugly Dish.”

I feel like punching him. I feel like telling him how the house we just remodeled looks empty in a way that's extraordinary. And how if we don't make it to the landfill before it closes, the trash—Bud included—will sit in his truck overnight and into the foreseeable future. I want to say that too many things might be ending at once.

Then again, he has explained that some rare people don't see the side effects of chemotherapy. That some days he should be able to go back to work. So maybe he thinks me

coming down to help is a kind of overreaction, and he's only placating my desire to feel necessary.

We load up the truck and head down Orchard Street towards the landfill. The Hawaiian hula girl on the dashboard sways wildly with each pothole. We are passing beige apartment complexes and vacant lots overgrown with Scotch broom.

Without thinking, I blurt it out. I say, "You don't seem worried about having cancer at all."

He turns off the radio. We drive for another minute.

"I don't know what to tell you, Patrick. I'm taking each day at a time."

"So, you are afraid?"

"I'm a positive person. That's my personality. And I've always felt that if people don't like that—I don't give a shit."

We're on the road to the landfill. As we pass the sparse, sickly grass and quadrants of PVC pipe, I think about how my dad takes a month long vacation to Hawaii every August. He has neighbors that text him when he leaves the garage open. Every June, the house is full of roses from his garden. For him, sources of happiness seem cultivated, deliberately worked towards, which is not a skill I've inherited. He appears to succeed most of the time, is what I mean.

Sometimes the flaggers in orange vests direct us to an area where we throw everything into a big haphazard pile. But today, they take us to the compactor. Here, you drop garbage down short metal slides and watch it crash into a large space about thirty feet below. Bulldozers in the pit shove around the multicolored debris until depositing it into a hole a train could fit through. Here, the garbage smells like it has been microwaved.

My dad takes a broken chandelier from the truck bed. “Watch this,” he says. Then he shoots it like a basketball in a big arch over the railing. The bulbs and brass explode and resound below.

He raises his fist, leaning over the railing like he’s on a disembarking ship.

“Oh yeah?” I say. I grab a five gallon bucket filled with drywall and stripped screws. I lunge toward the railing then toss it over. Everything spills out in a jagged arch.

Now we are throwing everything. We throw paint buckets, rolls of shag carpet, old insulation. We throw pressboard scraps like Frisbees. Everything loud and unexpected when it hits the other garbage below.

And when everything else is gone, we grab the big ugly dish from the back. We grip it on each end, feeling the tightness of the day in our shoulders. Together we count to three, then hurl it above the chasm of refuse. And while we are waiting for it to crash into the garbage below, I do not grieve the empty truck, the possibility of nothing more to throw away.



## DAYS OF THE WALRUS

We were on the patio at Linda's, the bar with the loudest music and the biggest collection of ironic taxidermy. The occasion was that it was sunny outside. More specifically, it was the first real sunny day of spring. On this day every year, the sudden blue sky creates such a desperate levity that everyone in Seattle puts on the one tank top they own, gets drunk, loses their sunglasses, and calls in sick the next morning.

At a certain point I split off from my friends and started talking to a girl named Dani. She was part of a big group making a scene at the picnic table in the corner. She leaned on crutches, favoring a cast that came up to her knee. But she was all done up and wearing the coonskin hat the bartenders gave people when it was their birthday. She looked like "fun," which was good because I had recently vowed that I was done looking for something serious. I'd been single long enough that crushes were just way stations, moments of pre-disappointment. All good dates were alike; each bad date was bad in its own way.

Dani was talking about being a marine biologist. She worked at the zoo, leading educational programs for schoolchildren and "organizing the wildlife"—her words.

"What's the latest news at the zoo?" I was saying. "I haven't been since I was a kid."

"It's exciting times," she said. "Our Pacific Walrus—her name is Maddie—is pregnant. When the calf comes, we're opening a new exhibit."

I realized I knew what she was talking about. For the past couple months, billboards and banners on public transit had been promoting the new "Rocky Shores" exhibit. The advertisements depicted a cartoon baby walrus floating in crystal blue water. He was cute and chubby like an amputee teddy bear.

“But, sometimes I worry that the zoo is getting ahead of itself,” she said. “Do you know only five walrus have ever been born in captivity?” Her eyes softened, like she was imagining the parents dragging their tusks around an empty enclosure.

“Well what are you supposed to do, *not* make a big deal out of it?” I said. “Do people wait to set up a nursery until after their baby is born?”

She raised her drink to me. “Very reassuring words,” she said.

One of her friends leaned over. She had perked up at the mention of the walrus. The friend said, “Did you know that the male walrus has the largest penis of any mammal?”

“It’s any *land* mammal,” said Dani. “You have to consider whales.” Then she turned to me, feigning a sigh. “My friends are always trying to impress me with their zoology.”

“Big penises are impressive,” I said.

She gave a surprised and disappointed laugh, then handed me her crutches and arranged herself sitting on the top of the picnic table. She wore a tiny white tank top and a floral skirt. Her skin was tan in a way that looked against its wish to be pale.

We talked and drank for a while longer. Eventually she asked what I “did” and I had to tell her I just got my bachelor’s degree in studio art. She thankfully didn’t ask *what kind of stuff* I painted. In return, I didn’t ask about her broken leg. At one point she pulled out her phone and showed me a video called “Polar Bear Versus Walrus Colony,” which sounds like a badass death match but is actually just a young bear trying to get to his den, but he’s unable to scale an immense wall of walrus flesh.

Later, Dani’s friends surrounded her with a tray of neon green shots, about to sing. I was already so drunk that everyone looked faceless and beautiful in the waning sunlight, and then I

really considered the logistics of taking a stranger with a broken leg to bed. I asked myself if a girl with a cast could get fucked. Why did I phrase it like that? I decided I had to leave.

I stood up and wished her a happy birthday. When she waved and said I should come visit her at the zoo, I figured I'd never see her again.

When Dani found me on Facebook a few days later, I did what anyone would do. I looked through all her photos, scrolling into the past until she became a red-cheeked sorority girl. Face painted at football games. Drinking Bud Light in crowded, dingy basements. I found out that she'd had a fiancé after graduating college. The last picture of them is at Halloween. He's in a half-assed lab coat and she's wearing a heartbreaking gymnast leotard that seems to cover her vagina only by magic. Shortly after that, there's a post wherein she thanks everyone for supporting her decision to "start over." 90 likes. I thought about it all for a while. Although the sorority thing originally made me think she was too white bread, the fiancé thing made me think she had integrity, and was probably a bit jaded.

We started messaging each other.

Dani: *All the employees are trying to name the baby walrus. I need your help.*

Me: *I'm thinking Winston, maybe Charles.*

Dani: *LOL he's a walrus, not a British aristocrat. What about "E.T?"*

Me: *Brilliant. But maybe too cute?*

Dani: *For who? Schoolchildren and geriatrics?*

And so on. Eventually we somehow decided that Dani was going to call me when the walrus went into labor, and if it happened during regular hours she'd get me a guest pass to

witness “the miracle of birth.” It was hard to tell if she had created an excuse to see me, or if she was really that excited about animals.

So it became a thing. I imagined us celebrating the walrus’ birth by drinking champagne in plastic cups and running off to kiss beneath a tank of yellow seahorses or whatever. I looked through her Facebook again. Then I pulled up my own profile and imagined I was her, judging me. I pictured her being impressed.

About the whole “being single” plan—the truth is, having a romantic interest wasn’t just nice, it was addicting. I needed someone who could show up in my daydreams. Without that, the future was merely a new place, an empty enclosure with the sun shining down like a frozen lemon in the sky.

The employees at the zoo were all shouting: “C’mon Maddie!”

I was in a fluorescent, high-roofed enclosure that smelled like a wet hamster cage. Dani was next to me, wearing a green polo shirt, khakis, and a soft cast without crutches.

Before us, a 3,000 pound pregnant walrus was curling up in its enclosure like a roly poly. It was letting out horrible moans.

Then the calf simply appeared next to Maddie like a magic trick. I was watching the whole time but somehow never saw the thing actually come out of its mother’s womb. And then it started flapping around confidently, brown and rumped with its own distended belly—not at all like the cartoon baby on the advertisement. We all cheered and slapped hands. There was no champagne—it was a zoo, after all.

After a while, a few zoologists took the baby out to the exhibit, which was still closed off to the rest of the zoo. There was a waterfall, tiered cliffs, underwater viewing stations. A trainer

threw a ball into the water and the baby dove in, swimming like a darting bird and pushing the ball to the surface.

Dani said, “Isn’t this amazing?”

“Yeah. He sure is a chubby little baby.”

She swatted at me. “He was in the womb for over 16 months. What did you expect?”

“I’m just surprised by how adult he looks.”

“Wait until he’s got tusks and weighs over a ton.”

Eventually, the baby curled up next to his mother and fell asleep in the sun. Some zoologists left, while others hung around talking. The excitement had worn off, and Dani was starting to talk about the rest of the workday.

We hugged and said we wanted to see each other soon.

Back outside, I was alone in the Asian forest sanctuary, where an elephant was fondling a ten-foot log. I was trying to find out why I felt dissatisfied, as if I expected something else to come of the afternoon.

I sent Dani a text.

*Me: Dinner sometime this weekend?*

*Dani: Oh yes, I’d love that.*

When she responded, I was sitting in front of the Giant Pacific Octopus tank. I had been watching its suctioning limbs climb up a glass wall, only to fall down and plunk into the water after getting close to the top. I was imagining how our date would go, if Dani would come home with me. She was in her gymnast leotard, standing at the foot of my bed.

We had dinner on another sunny evening. The little urban parks were crowded with people slack lining, reading, sunbathing. Dogs were everywhere. Dani and I ate at a vegan restaurant with a nearly incomprehensible menu. We had seaweed salad that tasted like someone's mouth you've been kissing for a few minutes. I was able to talk about my paintings without sounding arrogant. When her ex-fiancé was brought up, she flipped her hand dismissively, as if he was something unimportant she had left in a taxi and didn't want back. Her cast was off. She was wearing a sheer top through which I could see the outline of her bra. We left and drank more at different bars. We ran into people we knew. I took her ID from a bouncer. She said, "Don't" and I looked at it and said, "You're beautiful." She said, "I know." There wasn't much to it. All good dates are alike.

I walked her home to the north side of Capitol Hill. She led me to the front entrance of brand new condominiums called *Joule*, which had replaced a popular strip of dingy bars and neighborhood bookstores. That sort of thing was happening all over town. Developers had the audacity to name the condos next door *Gatsby*— someone threw a rock through the window of the Qdoba on the ground floor the first week it opened.

Inside, I felt like I was on the set of a movie. Dani had a white couch and a flatscreen TV that swiveled around on a built-in shelf. There was a brown and black painting of the Eiffel tower. Gold jewelry hung from refurbished lattice fence. Floor-to-ceiling windows casted fuzzy, faraway reflections of everything inside.

She turned on the TV and plopped onto the couch, leaning up against the armrest with her ass jutting out onto the middle cushion. I fit in behind her. She flipped channels until stopping on a show called *Dance Moms: Miami!* From what I gathered, over-involved housewives and their

kids were in teams, learning dance numbers together. Everyone was telling everyone else to “get fierce.”

Dani said, “I think I’d make the best fucking housewife. Seriously.” When she looked at me I felt like I was the only person she felt comfortable saying that to. We were both still drunk, but in that moment I remember thinking I was exactly where I wanted to be. My arm hairs stood up and the whole world seemed to be floating on water, drifting off to someplace good. I felt like we were a couple.

Commercials came on and people were breakdancing with these new laptops that swiveled around in every way imaginable. I kissed her. I pulled off her shirt and carried her to her room. Then we were both naked in the near-dark. I kissed down her torso and when I was down there she propped herself up on her elbows.

“I want to feel you,” she said.

“Do you have a condom?”

“If you want to fuck me, just fuck me.”

I couldn’t argue with that, or I didn’t want to. We tumbled around in different positions for a while until I was on top.

We both seemed close when she said, “Go crazy.” Just that. It mystified me. What did she *mean*? I was already going pretty fast. Go crazy? I pretended I didn’t hear her. Our shouts echoed off the fake vintage brick wall until I pulled out and came on her stomach.

The next morning, I rolled on top of her and I asked what she planned to do that day. “Be hungover,” she said. I laughed and went to the kitchen and poured two glasses of water. But when I came back she was face down and asleep. I stood there for a second looking at her,

wondering how to get her out of bed to make some coffee, to go with me somewhere. I had expected to feel vulnerable before her in a romantic way, not an embarrassing one.

I tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn't. Light was coming through the window and Dani's comforter was too hot. When I got up to take a piss, the privacy was a strange relief, like stepping into the bathroom during a crowded house party. I flushed the toilet and washed my hands, splashed water on my face. I did it for a long time. But when I stood up straight, I couldn't open my eyes. I know it sounds crazy, but I knew if I looked at myself in the mirror I'd see a newborn walrus staring back at me. Whiskers and blubbery flesh. Beginnings of tusks. Skin turning grey from the Pacific sun. I knew that's what would happen, because I'd felt it so many times before, but never really saw. Once I did, there'd be no way of getting back to how things used to look. To what they were before I could see them.



**KENTBROOK! KENTBROOK! KENTBROOK!**

When Helen stops the car under the sign for American Airlines and doesn't get out to say goodbye, I consider launching into a tirade in which I list all her faults. Like how she'd be sexier without so many moral hang-ups, how she's dependent on her officious parents, and so on. In this fantasy I end by saying, "I want to marry you and all your fucking problems—I wish that was enough," which is admittedly just something I heard in a movie. And then of course she starts to cry, so I slam the door and walk into the airport without looking back.

But that's not who I am. Instead, I lean in for a kiss, then I get out and shut the door by letting go. After being herded through security, I order an artisan pizza in the food pavilion and listen to music. I sit.

At the gate, I flip through an old Skymall to pass the time. Commemorative baseball jewelry. Posture-improving tank tops. A service that will paint a portrait of your cat as royalty in Elizabethan garb—it ships within two days.

Wedge in the magazine I find an insert advertising a housing development called Kentbrook. On the brochure, there's a panoramic photo of a cul-de-sac nestled on a quiet ridge. Lines of cherry trees. Brick houses with complex gables. The Cascade Mountains jagging across the horizon. On the back, a picture of a chunky husband alongside a wife who embodies modest desirability, right down to her ruler-straight hair and half-exposed collarbone. I find myself envying Kentbrook's comfort and security more than I disparage its conformity. How could they *not* be happy? So much for everything I learned in college.

I buy a coffee and throw half of it away before boarding the plane. The in-flight movie is a romantic comedy, which I boycott by not taking complimentary headphones, but then I end up watching it without sound. It starts with Jason Lee at home talking to some woman who bears all

the qualities the genre uses for uptight fiancés—short brown hair, bitchy wool sweaters, an uncurvaceous body. So Jason Lee goes out and sleeps with some adorable blonde hooker or whatever. As the drama unfolds, I fall in love with the fiancée, even though she spends the whole movie ignorant, stressing out over cakes and haircuts. She's just furiously devoted is all, which I understand.

The plane lands in Los Angeles. As I wait for my father to pick me up, I consider two possibilities. The first is I tell him everything. In this scenario, he smacks the dashboard with his big hand. He says "don't be stupid." He's twice divorced and lives alone in a house I haven't seen yet. He tells me I have to confront Helen. "Confront," he keeps saying. Later he's calmer. We are sitting poolside in the twilight, drinking beers, commiserating about loss. He says something amazing. He says that when you finally accept love is gone, you are declaring that it never existed in the first place, since a memory that endures cannot speak for a feeling that has disappeared. I feel better. I feel so much better.

The other option is to not say anything at all. He shows me the remodeled bathroom and I say things about work. In the middle of the night, I eat cereal in a dim-lit kitchen that glows with the light of unfamiliar electronics. And when I walk down the hallway, I don't recognize where I am. I think it's my house, and that Helen is in the room I'm groping towards. We are together, and have come to a place where we find strength in conventionality. We are done asking for too much. We carry on if what we love begins to break in two. She keeps asking where we are, and I have to remind her. I am saying Kentbrook, Kentbrook, Kentbrook.

## BE LIKE WATER

When my mom was twelve years old, her father went missing for two days, then his body was found in the trunk of his own sedan, robbed and half-submerged on an empty bank of Moses Lake. She took me there when I was seventeen, a year after divorcing my father. We drove across the Cascade Mountains, past the apple orchards, and into the Scottsbroom desert. She pulled off a lakefront highway into a patch of tumbleweeds and desert bushes. The sun was setting behind a beige dust storm created by farmers plowing in the potato and asparagus fields. It's a part of Washington so depressing that, back in the 1800s, the Native Americans just gave it to the government. Chief Moses actually told the president, "If you want this god-forsaken land, you can take it." My mom rarely talked about her childhood. She grew up on a decommissioned air force base on the north side of the lake with seven siblings and a catatonic mother. They never found out who killed her dad.

We got out of the car and looked at the empty lake. My mom said all she wanted was to make my life better than hers. And did she do right by me? Was I happy? It must have been hard to shape my life into something good when all she had known was its opposite. But she did. And I was.

My parents didn't fight until they got money. In the beginning, my mom was nineteen and pregnant. They moved to Tacoma, started college, worked full time jobs. We lived in a duplex on a four-lane highway. Once, someone broke into our house and stole the most expensive thing they could find, which at the time was our vacuum cleaner. My estranged uncle died and they inherited his baby blue Cadillac, which looked absurd on our front lawn.

When they graduated from college, my mom worked as a freelance journalist and my dad started Pacific Door Supply. Years later, my mom became a local news columnist and my dad

had contracts with some of the largest schools and office buildings in the area. Then suburbs, two rottweilers, ski trips to Mt. Rainier in a sport utility vehicle. Parents in leather coats. Private school. Coming home to find a 62-inch monolithic television in the den. Then bankruptcy. Adultery. My dad had an affair with his secretary, an infuriating cliché of a woman named “Evelina” who drove a red Mercedes convertible that my mom slashed up with a knife, and allegedly scattered with used tampons. A pistol under the bathroom sink. Mom disappearing for long drives. Reticent at dinner and two fat dogs who were dying, not walked anymore, dead.

My mom was the one who left. She moved into a house on the north side of town, a dilapidated neighborhood beneath the shadow of a giant grey hospital with vaguely nautical windows. The house had blue vinyl siding, steep gables, a broken hot tub decaying in the backyard grass. She furnished it by picking through garage sales, so it swarmed with smells and styles of other people. A gaunt brown couch, water glasses that felt too small, an empty Aztec pot. Some blue Oriental rug with undecipherable patterns—a wormhole of concentric circles and boxy reptiles marching around its periphery. One small television without cable.

The last time I ever saw my mom and dad in the same room I was sixteen, and he came over to that house for dinner. The whole time he was trying to help, but he opened every wrong drawer first, didn’t know how to slice an avocado. He brought over a bottle of wine they didn’t open and had to rearrange the kitchen because the head of the table had been wedged between a wall and a bookshelf.

I remember my dad lingering for a long time at the dinner table, and how my mom kept getting up, sitting back down, eventually saying she had an article to finish. She was dressed in exercise pants and a ragged t-shirt that said MAUI. My dad had arrived in a tie that he’d taken off and I could smell the cologne on him. It was the first time he ever looked pathetic to me. The

dad who used to prod any silence with a joke, now staring at mom and tightening the muscles around his mouth and eyes like his face was about to slip away. I knew he needed to leave, if only to stop embarrassing himself. I didn't say much at dinner, kept looking past my mom to my own reflection in the mirrored shelf of an unfamiliar china hutch.

Eventually he left, and I went down to my room in the basement to read my history textbook. But the phone upstairs kept ringing and my mom wasn't answering. Eventually I came up to the main floor. The wireless handset was upstairs in my mom's attic bedroom, but I could see my dad's name on the caller ID.

"Mom!"

She came down with the phone in her hand and pressed a few numbers, then gave it to me. I put it to my ear and it was a voicemail. My dad was crying and telling my mom he loved her, but that he'd wrapped himself in several blankets so when he shot himself in the bathtub it wouldn't make too much of a mess.

When I lowered the phone from my ear, it rang again. I was going to answer, but my mom stepped past me and ripped the console off the wall, plastic and cords skittering across the yellow linoleum.

"There's no way he's going to do it," she said. "It's just a cry for attention."

"What if it's not?"

"There is so much happening between us right now, it's hard to know what to share and what you'll resent me for keeping from you. He'll be fine."

I went back downstairs to study, but I kept seeing my dad in a bathtub, blue afghans wrapped around his head, blood and brain matter seeping out towards the drainpipe from my adolescent years.

I went out the basement door and took a few leaps across our backyard, which had overgrown grass and rotten plums and petrified dog shit from the people who rented it before. I snuck out the back alley and got in my car, then made it across town in five minutes. It was the first time I'd driven one hundred miles an hour. The sound of tires kicking up trash and dirt in middle lanes. Jerking turns, then phantom inertia. The steering wheel like something I could pull up on and the car would take off, fly into the grey fog that was marbled black by night.

I parked a block down the street because I assumed that if I snuck into the house and started calling for my dad, he wouldn't shoot himself. But when I walked up the driveway, I saw flashes of silvery blue light from the television in the den. I walked along the side of the house and looked through the window and saw my dad sitting on the couch, eating a bowl of something and watching a stylized movie about the battle at Thermopylae. A bunch of juiced up Spartans running around, bearing anachronistic shaved chests—that sort of thing. I didn't tap on the window or go inside, just crouched there in the flowerbed until the end of the movie. I drove home.

That was back when I could still see a different version of myself, an original me growing up in that house and living an ordinary life, beyond the me that was driving down Alameda at midnight, glad that his father didn't commit suicide but also angry that he wasn't considering it. It only took a few more months for that me to disappear, to collapse into memory like a relative who died when I was three years old. Even an image of him on a plaid couch seems preposterous for me to recall, like something I dreamt up and retained for no reason.

Twice a week, my mom began receiving envelopes in the mail of torn up photos, images of herself that had been cut out of family portraits, wads of ashes that could have been anything. She retaliated by attacking my dad's character. Sometimes all she needed was an overweight

person in a grocery aisle. “Your father hates fat people,” she’d whisper. “He thinks they’re disgusting. Did you know that?” Then regarding a shelf of bread, “Do you like sourdough for your lunch sandwiches?”

I have to remind myself that my parents were 35 years old, and that this was the only breakup they’d ever been through, and that their families were either dead or abusive or drug addicts and so there was no one around to tell them to stop being stupid. The first time most of our hearts get broken, we don’t have cars, bank accounts, or children. We don’t have empty separate houses from which to hurl our newfound hatred.

That was the most astounding thing, their hatred. Once the divorce had lifted them out of place, there it all was, like moving an old rock in a forest and finding all the insects beneath, crowding the indented soil.

I was seventeen when things started getting better. Routines were re-established. I stopped using an alarm clock because my mom’s high heels on the floor above woke me every morning. I claimed the entire basement as my room, filled it with stolen traffic cones and musical instruments. My friends arrived at all hours through the back door. We wrote song lyrics in sharpie on the cement walls. Someone drew an alien smoking a joint. My friends stayed over on the weekends and we slept together on a purple shag carpet in a heap of blankets. My mom was young and pretty, had an arsenal of black skirts and blouses, a blasé way of pinning her chin to her shoulder like she was posing for a photograph. She never said goodbye before hanging up the phone. She mystified my friends, gave them condoms, laughed the word “bullshit” when we lied. She’d ask them to load the dishwasher and take out the trash. I have this image of my friend Skyler—who had a septum piercing, long black hair, and anarchy signs on his clothes—mopping the kitchen floor while my mom went outside for a cigarette. Then us walking down the dark

staircase to wail on guitars, to the basement where I lost my virginity and hid drugs and read philosophy and told girls I loved them. I don't remember being scared of anything.

Now, I can't walk down the stairs into any early 20<sup>th</sup> century basement without feeling like I'm going to the moon. The smell of old wood and concrete mixing with fabric softener, the hum of a washing machine, exposed light bulbs, clicks of a red-eyed furnace, blankets damp in the morning. A conjuring of the people and situations that have been abolished by the neutrality of adulthood.

By the time I was seventeen, I thought I had already seen the worst. I knew things my friends didn't. I could come home early from guitar lessons, see an unfamiliar corvette in the driveway, open the front door only slightly and hear moans in the shower then drive over to my father's and pretend like nothing happened. Then I could come back on Sunday to sit out on the back porch in deep-assed Adirondack chairs with my mom, reading books and listening to the gospel music from the church across the junkyard alley. The secrets of the divorce began to make me feel like I was a force of stability. I had found the small pocket in my mind where images and words could go to be forgotten, though on certain days I could feel them in there, getting churned and remade into something else.

My dad put most of his energy into work, and our deal was I had to hit a certain number of hours to pay off the new car he'd bought for me. One winter break, we carried 100 industrial doors into an elementary school, trying not to bang the flimsy metal lockers or nudge the ghastly crayon drawings from the wall, then installed each one. I remember the last one we did was a closet in the cafeteria bathroom. How my dad looked around when the last copper pin was in place. "Right after your mother and I divorced, places like this looked a lot different," he said. "Everything was bound to end. Door company owner dies alone at age 35. In an elementary



school bathroom. Right next to the piss stained midget toilets.” He laughed. “I’m so glad that’s over.”

When my mom talked about the men she was dating, she usually belittled them. She told me how one guy ate Chinese food with his hands on the first date. How another showed up at her office with a teddy bear the size of a toddler. A guy named Chaz always talked about the intricacies of the plumbing supply company he owned. “Smallest penis I’ve ever seen.” One guy pestered her so much that when he called the house phone I started pretending to be the queen of England. “Just talk to me, Jackie!” he’d say. “Well Helloooo!” I’d reply. I put him on speakerphone once when my mom was around and she buried her face in the living room couch cushions, trying not to laugh too loud.

That’s when I was a senior in high school. It was the year I started looking at colleges and we drove out to Spokane to visit Gonzaga and on the way we stopped in Moses Lake, went to the place her father’s car had coasted into the water with his body inside. It was the year that she asked me if I was happy and I stood next to her and said yes. Back when becoming someone new made us prolific at who we were. The two of us like an apex around which everything revolved, and the people and memories supposed to stifle us performed distant revolutions, were tiny things out there, vibrating with insignificance.

Then there was Evan. He was thirty years old and an engineer for the Department of Transportation. A baby-faced guy with wavy brown hair and oval nerdy glasses that looked good on him. I could tell him and my mom were getting serious by how many times I saw his truck parked out in front, or the frequency I heard his heavy footsteps clomping above me. He didn’t make an officious fool of himself. He didn’t try to talk to me about “chicks” or bring over his bass and suggest we “jam” together. He didn’t take us out to dinner and make a big show of

paying for everything. No, Evan just made himself invisible. I couldn't tell if I liked him or not. On the way to somewhere else, my mom and I once stopped at his house out in unincorporated Puyallup. He had a large collection of science fiction novels, two torn apart rally cars, and an Australian shepherd named Suzanne that knew practically every command a dog could. All I knew is that his life seemed separate, and that made me comfortable.

I remember microwaving something in the kitchen one night, and my mom was in the living room on the phone. She was telling a friend about going to brunch with Evan. "We ordered, and I went to the bathroom. When I came back, our food was served. He had buttered my toast for me. No one has ever buttered my toast for me! That's when I knew I loved him."

I groaned. "Lame!"

"Hey now, you little punk!"

That's what she called me, a little punk. It was the same thing she called me when I beat her at arm wrestling for the first time when I was thirteen. I was doing pushups and challenging her every week. When I eventually was able to slam the back of her hand down, I had jumped up, shouted, danced like a football player after a touchdown. I was making the most of it because I knew there was no point for me to ever challenge her again. "You little punk!"

That May, my mom and Evan bought a piece of property on the far south side of town. To get there, you drove past the massive parking lot of a casino, the wrought iron gates of a Tribal cemetery, a Bikini Barista stand, then up a hill onto a forested plot of land that overlooked the Puyallup Valley. On a clear day, you could see the Olympic Mountains in the distance, but most of the time it was the industrial port, the railcars and trussed bridges, superfund sites. And our deserted downtown built at the bottom of a hill, so even the skyscrapers didn't reach the

altitude of the rest of the city. My mom and Evan were going to build a house on that property, but not until I left for college.

There is one important scene from that period of time that has detached itself from any afternoon or morning I can remember. In this scene, I am standing in the living room with my mom, and she has a sweater sleeve rolled up to her shoulder. She is showing me an insect bite on her forearm. Something about the woods, the property line for the new house. But when it's time for me to respond, the scene dissipates, like a thin cloud arriving from nowhere, going nowhere.

Things changed when Evan moved in that summer before I left for college. I had to make room for his boxes and furniture in the basement. He and my mom were getting ready to put the house on the market, so I had to re-paint all the walls. It took four coats to cover up the Sharpie drawings, and even then I could still see faint outline of aliens, anarchy symbols and song lyrics of my high school years. My mom started expecting everything to be clean, yelled at me for leaving lights on, for the fact that my bathroom had molded over in some places.

I started spending more time at my dad's, and when I'd come back she'd be especially mean. That's when she started making more comments about him. He'd taken me to Hawaii as a graduation present and she said it was impractical, started calling him "Disneyland Dad." She said he was addicted to porn, that he didn't like her friend Mary because her husband was Mexican. "Your father," she'd say, invoking him as a disparaging conjunction. He's shallow. He's racist. You've always been more like me, anyways.

I didn't respond to her accusations. I knew from back during the divorce that if I challenged her, it would be encouragement. I wouldn't be defending my dad so much as I'd be taking his place.

Then one morning I was at the sink washing off an egg-caked frying pan. I had returned from staying a week at my dad's the night before, and I hadn't seen her yet. She just walked into the kitchen and said the only reason she got pregnant at 19 was because my dad refused to wear condoms and they couldn't afford birth control. "He's not teaching you to be that kind of man, is he?" I turned around and threw the pan past her at the back window. It went straight through the paned glass and zipped through the backyard grass like a rock skipping on water.

"That's it," she said. "That is where I draw the line. I've put up with enough violence in my life deal with it in my house."

"Dad was never violent."

"Yeah, like he'd hit me if you were there."

I was breathing heavily, in an almost pre-crying sort of way. I took a few steps towards her. Being six inches taller than her was still a new thing.

"Who my father is doesn't make you any less of a terrible person," I said.

She didn't look at me after that. She grabbed a broom and started sweeping up the broken glass. "Evan is not going to be happy about this," she said.

"Why would he care? It's not his house."

"I don't mean about the window."

I packed up my things and spent another week with my dad. When I came back, I was ready for Evan to try to say something. I looked him straight in the eyes whenever he was around, threw back my shoulders, clenched my jaw. I started to blame him, like all the comments about my cleanliness and where I went at night and my father—like they were Evan speaking through my mom, ventriloquizing her, turning her against me and towards him. I wanted to fight him. But when I came back, a piece of pressboard was nailed to the empty window, which made

it so dark it was hard to see what you were eating at the kitchen table. Someone came to fix it a few days later. We never talked about it again.

Back then, I thought arguments were either resolved or they weren't. And the space they existed in was separate from the rest of our lives, like a ring you step in and out of. I did not see how each fight added another figure to the melee, just more versions of ourselves kicking and screaming at the others multiplying in the past.

My mom started sleeping a lot, almost all day on the weekends. She talked about getting old, couldn't open jars because of her arthritis, said she was having trouble concentrating at work. She went to several doctors and they said she was fine, perfect, just a woman in her thirties. I found antidepressants in her medicine cabinet.

Near the end of that summer, my mom's friend Ellen got married in a Victorian mansion overlooking Puget Sound. I brought Alexa, who I'd been dating for a few months, and she showed up in this flimsy black dress that I pictured could be pulled off her in a second, like yanking linen off a smooth table. All the middle-aged people were staring at her, and eventually my mom put her hand on Alexa's back and said, "I can see your bra straps, honey." Alexa ran her thumbs underneath the straps and snapped them on her faintly freckled shoulders. "There they are!" she said. My mom sighed. "I only meant it's the wrong dress for that."

After the reception, my mom and Evan came up to me with these big smiles on their faces, and said they needed to talk to me privately. We went into a back room, stood by a pile of overcoats and an old piano. Evan grabbed her hand.

I don't exactly remember how they phrased it. Whether it was "We're pregnant" or "You're going to have a sibling." But I do remember having to scroll through different responses in my head until finally coming to the thing people are supposed to say. Aren't you too old? Was

it an accident? Are you getting married? “Congratulations.” And I remember how I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone, it being Ellen’s wedding and all.

That evening, Alexa and I took a drive out to Grandview and parked on a bluff that overlooked an abandoned gravel mine on the sound. While the sun was still setting, we slipped under a fence, took off our shoes, and walked down to the edge of the water. We held hands, running up and down sand embankments until coming across an old gravel elevator shaft, which was basically a pair of forty foot high cement walls spiraling in on each other. We found our way to its center, then I pressed her back to the wall of the sentinel with the wind howling inside like a giant shell.

“You’re acting weird,” she said.

“No I’m not.”

“This is the quietest you’ve ever been.”

I kissed her, and when I pulled back all I saw was my own face parading its bewilderment as if in a mirror. I didn’t know what was important, what should be revealed or focused on. What I wanted. What I might say to get it. It made me think that maybe I wasn’t in love with Alexa, even though looking back, I was, or should have been.

In September, I left for college in Seattle. Any time my mom called, it led to an argument, though all I remember fighting about was why we didn’t get along anymore. Hours would go by. My ear would be sore and I’d be on my fifth loop around campus.

One night, I decided I wasn’t going to answer at all, but she called four times in a row. I picked up.

“Luke,” she said. “I’m down at the railroad tracks.”

“What?”

“I don’t feel like myself. I don’t think I belong in this world. I’m losing you.”

I had left my dorm room, was hastily zigzagging past friends who were going to the dining hall, telling her how much I loved her and she wasn’t losing me. I made every excuse for us I could. She stopped me when I reminded her that she was pregnant, and hormones and all.

“I’ve been pregnant before, Luke. It wasn’t like this. I’ve had every test. They looked at my brain. I’ve been tested for cancer, palsy, lupus, AIDS, everything under the sun. They’re telling me that I’m fine.”

“Maybe you are.”

“I’m telling you I’m not.”

She didn’t call me from the railroad tracks again, but sometimes I answered the phone and she’d already be crying, and just asking me if she was a good mother. My preferred spot to go have those conversations was a secluded bench behind the Jesuit residences. I started to wonder how many priests I kept up at night, talking down my mother from suicide. I sometimes hoped that one of them would come out and speak to me afterwards. Say something like, I was doing a good job—I don’t know.

When I went home for Thanksgiving, the house was on the market and the basement was a sterile warehouse of plastic-wrapped furniture. I remember cobwebs on my old bed, standing idly in doorways, waking up to noises of appliances in the kitchen. The anxiety of communication, the sudden plethora of coasters, new guilt of long showers. I was visiting someone else’s family—that’s the only way I can explain it.

My mom used to slip into my room just before I fell asleep, sit on the edge of my bed and lead me to a confession. Girl trouble? Is it too cold down here? What’s that song about, the one I heard through the floorboards? But once those questions were asked from the passenger seat of

Evan's truck, or across a dinner table, after everything that happened, I found myself only telling half the story.

Josh was born in March of my first year in college. The bus took me straight from Seattle to the hospital in Tacoma. I came with a teddy bear and lyrics to a lullaby my mother had asked me to write for the baby, though I intentionally left my guitar in Seattle so no one would ask me to sing.

When my mom was in labor, it was just me and Evan's parents in the waiting room, my step-grandfather talking about his trailer repair business, me counting how many times Evan's mom said "excited" and "baby brother" in the same sentence. But when we eventually got to go in, my mom was still lying back in the bed, not holding the baby. They told us her heart had stopped for 20 seconds, but now she was "stabilized."

Weeks later, I'd be on the phone with my mom and she'd ask me if I wanted to know what she saw when she was dead. She said at first the room began to dissolve at the edges. Then no light or awareness or anyone talking to her at all. She said she slid behind herself and felt everyone she'd ever known surround her with warmth. They stood there hairless and covered with some kind of powder so it was impossible to tell them apart. The ones closest were leering at her with unblinking eyes. Their bone structures and facial expressions were familiar, but she couldn't quite tell them apart. Then their mouths opened in unison, and then she was back in the hospital bed.

But that day, when he was born, I remember looking into the little sterile crib Josh had been placed in, with the stock hospital beanie, white blanket, the plastic bracelet around his wrist, the red face and colorless eyes. I remember feeling nothing at all. In my head I was



shouting his name, JoshJoshJoshJosh, hoping it would stick, make me feel like there was a person here now who was going to change my life.

Around the same time, my dad started dating a woman named Carrie. She was an obstetrician who loved the band Radiohead—a self-described “super fan.” The band had just come out with a new record, and her and my dad traveled all over the world to see their tour. Amsterdam. Helsinki. Iceland. New York. Carrie knew the band’s bodyguard, and somehow always won the “meet the band” stuff on the Internet and radio stations. She was younger but she challenged my dad on everything, critiqued his business decisions. She made fun of him all the time and he loved it. His laugh reached a pitch I’d never heard before and I remember thinking that right then, at twenty years old, I had before me the first example of two people who loved each other. It seemed so obvious, suddenly, that my parents did not have it when they were together. A once restricted dimension expanding.

I didn’t come home for summer break, just stayed in the city. My mom’s house was sold before the new one was done being built, so Evan’s parents lent them a trailer that they parked at one end of the new property. Muddy boots out in the cold. Random appliances beneath a tarp. Cloth diapers on a clothesline. That’s where my mom was when she found out she had Lyme disease. I picture her there, just after getting off the phone with a doctor, sitting cross-legged on a bed in that cheap corridor, illuminated only by the white glow of symptoms on a Wikipedia page. Nerve pain, rapid eyesight loss, fatigue, memory loss, panic attacks, frank psychosis. All there in one package, disseminated by a tick bite two years prior, misdiagnosed by a handful of doctors who didn’t believe that chronic Lyme disease existed, wasn’t capable of attacking her central nervous system. But I wasn’t there, whenever it was that she found out. I only remember she

presented it to me as a possibility, which I turned over in my head and comfortably denied until I couldn't anymore.

There was only one Lyme disease specialist in Washington State. Her name was Anne Norquist and she'd had the disease herself. She was a nurse practitioner before that. The only difference between Anne and my mom was that doctors listened to Anne when she said she wasn't just an aging woman with bipolar disorder.

The house still wasn't done by Christmas, but a friend of my mom who lived in Graham offered for them to stay in the apartment above their garage. Evan picked me up from the bus stop and we drove an hour southeast, way past the midlands to a farmhouse at the end of a dirt road. The apartment had one small room in the back, then a living room/kitchen combo. In between two bookshelves by the front door was my bed, made from random blankets and couch cushions. Josh slept in the back room with my mom and Evan, and there was a peacock that flew up to the roof and shrieked at odd intervals. I remember it sounded like a large housecat being strangled, or like a large housecat pretending to be strangled. If there's any sound that can convince you of the godlessness of the universe, that's it.

My mom had started treatment by then, so she was on an array of medication. Ketamine nasal spray. Antibiotics that turned her tears and urine orange. Serotonin uptake inhibitors. She showed me a picture of herself sprawled out on the trailer bed on top of about a hundred empty pill bottles, like someone would do if they won a bunch of cash. A litany of side effects. Her skin dried out and couldn't be exposed to sun, so she couldn't leave the house without big sunglasses and an outrageous hat. She was agoraphobic, couldn't focus on long conversations. Couldn't write. Lost her job.

The next morning, I remember checking the weather on my laptop several times. Each time I did, the severity of a winter storm due to arrive that night worsened, and I had this feeling I was going to be trapped there. When I asked my mom to take me back into town, I remember Evan was sitting in a rocking chair, watching a holiday special where ice skaters improvised to live performances of Goo Goo Dolls songs.

“You’re asking to leave when you just got here yesterday.”

“The snow,” I said.

“So you can ditch your sick mother.”

“The snow! What am I going to do here for five days?”

“I don’t know, be a part of this family. Have Christmas. Jesus, Luke, what do I have to do?”

She kept yelling that and went into the kitchen area and grabbed a pair of scissors. She said that people thought she was fine because she looked the same, but she wasn’t. She said she was going to cut all of her hair off then shave it, finally look like something was wrong. So people wouldn’t forget. She went into the back room and Evan got up from the chair and rushed in after her. They were in there together for over an hour. The peacock wailed, scratched its talons on the shingles of the slanted roof above me.

Eventually my mom came back out, all of her hair still there. I was sitting on the makeshift bed and she threw a check at me.

“There,” she said. “You’re liberated. That’s for the rest of your college tuition, since that’s all I am to you anyways. You don’t have to deal with me anymore.”

I ripped up the check and threw all the pieces at her. “I’ll stay.”

That night, it snowed two feet all across western Washington. Every newscaster began saying “snowpocalypse” with a tinge of excitement. I watched a video of an accordion bus in the city go skidding down Thomas Avenue and crash through a cement barrier, half hanging down over the interstate like a giant worm. Everything shut down.

We spent the next three days in that apartment until rain came and washed all the snow away. We watched a lot of holiday movies, played board games complacently. I made dirty dishes just so I could wash them, turn my back to the rest of the room. We talked to Josh and handed him around—I still have a picture of me holding him in front of the television of that apartment. I’m smiling at the camera while he’s tangled in my arms like an awkward bald koala.

When it was finally time for them to take me to the bus stop, my mom wasn’t ready. She was in pajamas breast-feeding Josh. So it was Evan who drove me back into town. He kept the radio off and drove slow. Eventually he said my mom would be okay. “She’ll be okay.” That’s what he said into the white noise of his truck cab. How could you be so lazy, so terrible at commiseration? How many fucking scissors do you need to pry from her hands before you told the truth? Before we’d have something in common? Can’t you tell me it’s not normal? Can’t you tell me it’s not my fault? That’s what I remember thinking.

We didn’t hug when I stepped out of his truck, and while I waited for the express bus to take me back to Seattle, something happened. I was pacing up and down the street, back and forth between the light poles dripping with pigeon shit, the derelict huffing blankets in dry corners, fingering my ridiculous fist of change, looking up at the giant blue tit of the Tacoma Dome. It was then that I heard the voice of my own hardened heart. Don’t call. Don’t ever come back.

I'd learned that the absence of someone is slightly more bearable than the process of losing her.

My mom's unanswered voicemails accumulated. Started morphing into veiled threats, then basic insults. She said I was a terrible son, that I couldn't possibly understand what was happening. She said she'd read a book on "extended adolescence" and that I was still a child and therefore wasn't mature enough to have a sick mother. Somewhere she made a reference to Albert Einstein that made no sense, but somehow was supposed to be an insult. She said I was going to lose all my money because I learned to be excessive like my dad. Josh would hate me. I was going to end up in jail like her brother. She called every friend and ex girlfriend she could, asked unflattering questions. Was I drinking too much? Was I in therapy? Had I made a habit of hurting people who loved me? In one voicemail, she was coming home from the psych ward of a hospital she'd committed herself to. She told me about her conversation with a burn victim whose entire family had died, who was so far gone he looked at everything as if assessing how it might aid his next attempt at suicide.

I kept listening to the voicemails because I was waiting for the one where it turns out to be Evan calling, the one where he says she's dead or went into cardiac arrest or they found her empty car at one end of The Narrows Bridge. I was waiting for it partially because I knew how guilty I was going to feel if she died and all I had were those unanswered messages saved on my phone, how they piled up over the three years I completely cut her out of my life.

It was easier with only one family. Birthdays on my dad's back deck, margaritas and card games, bringing my girlfriend to New York with them and running around Manhattan at dark, taking photographs of rusted fire escapes, bagel sandwiches all week until hugging under an umbrella outside Roseland Ballroom, waiting for the band to arrive.

Every once in a while, I'd get another voicemail. She always paused at the beginning, made sure to tell me the exact date and time, even though the robotic voice did that for her.

People asked me what happened. "Why don't you talk to your mom?" I could never describe it. Sometimes I'd start by explaining how we didn't get along, but I'd always provide inadequate examples. "She called my girlfriend *frail of spirit*," I'd recount. "She wants me to hate my father and I don't," I'd say. If I said she had Lyme disease, their chins would go back into their necks with confused sympathy, like I had said someone was dying from an abscessed tooth. And elaborating made me sound like a heartless encyclopedia. "It's the fastest growing infectious disease in the United States," I'd say. "Physicians call it *the great imitator*." As in, here is the research that demands your sympathy.

More than anything, I struggled with the idea that she could become someone that wasn't her. I thought that if a disease attacked her brain, it would just punch it out, degenerate its functions. Like, her hands contorting into rigidly askew fists are still her hands. Just as a disease couldn't possibly alter her personality enough that, without precedent, she'd find herself screaming about how hopeless and selfish I was. But I was wrong. Somehow, the hand that contorted also lost its lines and fingerprints, was no longer the hand she'd been born with. Her voice, then, not the one telling me I'm worthless. Breaking down. I'm going to kill myself, it says.

Part of me will always be listening to those voicemails. Their phrases inhabit my brain like catchy songs. Part of me will always wonder what it really matters who someone is. They could change at any moment, turn quickly on their heels. My own mother as reachless as a disremembered friend. There she is, waiting in line at a coffee shop. God, what's her name?

But I missed her. Someone would say “Luke” like a plaintive question, or a voice would croon through a stereo in a way that it would make me stop, make me really hear my mother calling my name down the basement stairs like she used to. Alexa is on the phone. Dinner is ready. I’m going out for the night. Luke. Are you there? How many hours I’d pick up my phone and scroll down to “mom” and sit there, needing to hear her voice but knowing that the person on the other end wasn’t going to be version of her I wanted to speak to.

Where did the illness end and she begin? I broke several phones doing that, thinking too much until all I could do was destroy my ability to deliberate, watch the plastic bits explode across an empty street or lodge themselves in my apartment’s drywall.

When the voicemails stopped, I was reminded of her through little shocks, spontaneous connotations. A woman far down the street with the same curly hair. Some girl asking if I had any siblings. Sitting down with my guitar and wondering what to write about. She emerged from almost any quiet moment, the kind that allows whole people to appear.

Then I got a phone call from Carrie at midnight. This is what she told me. She said she was with my dad, watching television when someone knocked on the door. Carrie went downstairs to the landing, turned on the porch light, and through the oval glass saw the face of a woman she didn’t recognize. The woman nodded at her. She was wearing overalls, double-layered flannel, small eyeglasses, and hiking boots with the laces untied.

Carrie opened the door. “Can I help you?”

“I don’t understand why we can’t get along,” said the woman.

Then my father came to the top of the stairs. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“It would make it easier on Luke. If we spoke to each other. If we could be in the same room. I don’t understand why we can’t do that. Why can’t we do that?”

This is the part in the story where my dad interrupted Carrie's re-telling, said he couldn't believe he didn't recognize her at first—all dressed up like “howdy doody.”

“Yes, but what do you want?” said Carrie.

I can see my mom there, struggling to find the words, looking past the young woman, the immaculate staircase, to her ex-husband gripping each end of the upstairs banister. Embarrassed and determined. “I just want to talk.”

“About what?”

“I just told you!”

Bedroom lights in other houses turning on, neighbors peering out of windows at the people shouting abstract questions past each other. Carrie guarding the doorway.

“Nevermind!” She struggled down the steps in the dark, then backed her muddy car out of the driveway.

Carrie told the story to me with a tinge of delight, like she'd just got off a rollercoaster, and I resented her for it. Why didn't they invite her in? Why didn't they sit down at a table and ask her why she was there? Why did they have to treat her like a fucking fool?

The next day, I slept through the afternoon and then went to work. I was a server at an Italian restaurant called Pannevino. The owner was from Rome and had a bunch of black and white photos of his family on the walls. He said customers were supposed to feel like they were in someone's house.

That night, it felt unusually awful to polish stacks of heavy silverware with vinegar, cut up garnishes for the bar, make an 86 list, write specials on the chalkboard in swirling letters. To bring out the sandwich board after putting everything in its place, and to rest my elbows on the bar top and look out past the yellow candles on each table into the street, waiting for the first



customer to come in. I was way too comfortable. I felt like I was “getting away with something,” the way you do after stealing. The life I had was better than what I really deserved, and it had finally caught up to me.

After my shift, I rode my bike down through the densely wooded corridor of Interlaken Park. My ingratitude and betrayals swollen like tumors. I wanted to feel each one, reach my hand inside my own head and see how time had altered them. Halfway down the twisty hill, I turned off my bike light and for a moment could only see the half-moon puddled against the shifting clouds. When my eyes adjusted, I could see where the wet ferns and vines cascaded onto the pavement. I stood up, leaned over my handlebars into the black to get a sense of it. I felt weightless before I knew I was airborne. Damp limbs of evergreens whipping my face until the ground rose to smack me. Vague tumbling down a gulch. Eventually I came to a halt on my back, with a twisted knee and a back tire bent into the shape of a taco. The past three years desperately agog. I wanted to stay there all night, feel the sharp edges of pain, resist the luxury of going home. I had to call my mom. I wished I had suffered more.

She is made of beginnings. She is the person who taught my heart to beat properly. “Luke, are you still mad at me?” she said. Her voice is outside time, and for a moment I returned to knowing it, to feeling its uniqueness, abundant as an element. “No, I’m not,” I replied.

If you only listened to the words of our conversation, we would have sounded like mismatched strangers. It took me a long time to explain my degree. She told me about singing in choir at the Unitarian church. She explained Josh’s new obsession with battling tops called “Bey Blades,” which I kept hearing as “Babe Blades.” Our familiarity was there, but only inferred, physical, couldn’t be felt in words but in auras, postures, bones. How much had we lost?

A week later, my mom drove up to Seattle to see me. My apartment was a remodeled attic in an old house. It was right across from a fire station and a popular gay bar called The Cuff. Parking was difficult, so when my mom showed up her hair and scarf and cotton dress were soaked with rain. She'd gained about 80 pounds from all the medications she'd been on. She was carrying shopping bags filled with food in tupperware, jars of jam she'd made and was giving me. She looked sweet and happy and out of her element, like she's been on an adventure. She didn't look like the abstraction in my head that had angered me for the past three years.

I made stir-fry. Brewed some tea. We got along okay, but behaved like old friends who had grown apart, who could only love each other through the past.

A year went by, and I couldn't figure out why we couldn't get close. At first I thought we were too afraid of losing each other again, so we padded conversations with platitudes and cordiality. But then I realized that her pleasantness was created by lethargy, the drugs she took before seeing me, the ones that hid her new self. My memory told me who my real mother was, and it wasn't the even-keeled stranger sitting before me.

Now that Josh is six years old, a strange mix of love and terror drives me towards him. I love him in a way that requires me to constantly fear his destruction. But my mom is good with him. She tells me to remember I'm his brother, not his parent. She says don't coddle him. Don't talk down in a little baby voice. She says if he starts crying just tell him it's okay. Sometimes you need to cry.

I guess I'm waiting to detect the moment where things might go wrong. I'm arrogant enough to think I will be able pull him away from it. I don't want to admit that hardship is a cycle with no beginning, some kind of large harmless-looking spiral that incrementally tightens

and darkens into a point, becomes the black hole that swallows you. Where did it come from? Everywhere.

When my mom goes to see Anne, she drops Josh off at my apartment. I usually take him to a playground in Volunteer Park, which overlooks a field of graves at Lakeview cemetery. He asks questions about death and headstones, so I take him inside. I figure—what the hell.

He's developed a habit of reading names on the headstones. "Here lie Cynthia and Pan Wynn." He runs around, and the blue poncho my mom insists he wears flaps around like a miniature ghost. Bruce Lee is buried next to his son in that cemetery, and we often stop to look at the assortment of flowers and notes from inspired fans. I tried to tell Josh about Bruce Lee once. I said he went to college in Seattle a long time ago. He was a movie star. But no matter what I did, I couldn't describe Martial Arts. I looked it up on my phone, but it was way too complicated for a kid. Chinese Nationalism and personal liberation. Articles about how Lee pioneered the idea of fighting without fighting. You refuse to be assertive, and instead conform to the object opposing you. You try to be like water. Josh positioned himself before me, with open palms and wide eyes—the position you'd take if you were trying hard to absorb everything that's happening around you.

I have a strong desire to ask if he is happy. Am I doing right by you? But I don't ask it. I don't, because I see two people on the dusty bank of Moses Lake, and I worry that such questions will only ensure that we'll end up in the same place, after all, and I'll be there to watch him swan dive onto the dark, hard ground.

I go down to Puyallup and spend the night, every once in a while. My mom and Evan built a big white farmhouse at the edge of the bluff, but certain rooms are unfinished and the garage is just a frame of two by fours. They ran out of money because my mom lost her job and

it's nearly impossible for people with Lyme disease to file for disability in Washington State. Evan is exhausted and the house is usually a mess. I buzz around the kitchen and living room picking things up, bringing them to her. An old box of party favors. Bags of pretzels. Paperwork. Random computer cords. "Where does this go?"

On these nights, Evan and Josh go to bed early, and I stay up late with my mom. Sometimes we sit outside and I can smell the paper mills in Tacoma. The city is infamous for that sour dead smell, like someone has vomited into a pot of boiling water.

All we do is talk, but we can't create new memories. We just recast the old ones. She asks me to remember when I was Josh's age, when I threw tantrums or when she let me choose my punishment, how she bought me ice cream when I got suspended for punching a bully. How I used to tell her I wanted a brother. She asks me if I remember these things, and I do. Remember. She says it so much, as if I'm the one the past is crumbling away from. As if I'm the person who has bacteria in my body attacking the weakest parts of who I am. Trying to fight it and feeling like I'm attacking a wave in the ocean. Straining to overcome something that is built to absorb me. Thrashing at it only to get sucked out into darkness, then washing back up at the place I was before charging in, and the only thing I remember is not who I am but what I did to get there. An insect bite that supposedly looked like a bullseye. Ghost of a dead father at the edge of Moses Lake. Skillet through a window. Are you happy.

Remember, she says. Remember when we were learning to date at the same time and when we'd eat tempura and you grew a beard? When Steve Voigt asked who my new boyfriend was? When you and Shawn taught me how to snowboard at Crystal Mountain? Remember the way that time became more hideous the longer we didn't talk to each other? Do you remember the chasm you fell into? Do you ever think your selfishness caused you to miss crucial stages of

who I was? That who I have become is how I've ended up here? That they might end up being the same thing, eventually? Do you remember that's how a family can love each other? To know the full story? Do you, Luke? Do you remember?