Foreign Constellations

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FOREIGN CONSTELLATIONS

by

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B.A. College of Arts and Humanities, 2019

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ABSTRACT

*Foreign Constellations* is a magical realist collection that centers queer people of color in states of displacement. Facing disconnect from their own tribes along axes of faith, cultural tradition, sexuality, race, geography, and more, the Black and Hispanic characters in these eight stories chafe against the capacity of intersectionality to stratify rather than unite. They are, however, all Floridians, challenging the constraints of national perception with the breadth of their lived experiences. Set across Florida and beyond, each piece sees its protagonists venture into unfamiliar surroundings, or else return to old homes they no longer know how to navigate. A young woman and her sphinx companion run an uncomfortable errand on the Georgia border. Just outside the glow of Miami, a homeless grifter makes an unlikely arrangement with a palmist at his time-traveling condo. A couple test their differences at a beach near Cape Canaveral, where the water reveals people’s thoughts. The characters in these stories seek opportunity in magical soil, closure from sentient reflections, and kinship in the shedding of skin, reevaluating the parameters of family and interrogating what it means to belong.
To all my loves in Hollywood, for being my first home:
Mom, Isa, Mamita, Grandpa, and the girls
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SILVERFISH

Lazaro’s taking comes to me again as the first drops of an afternoon drizzle scurry down my windshield. Beyond them, middle schoolers pool into the pickup loop.

Through no effort of mine, our daughter doesn’t miss him, and I’m relieved. There was confusion, sure, when Lazaro lowered one foot and then the other out of the airboat, the Everglades soaking his cargos to mid-thigh, and fear when he bowed and then knelt into the arms of his reflection, which moved independently of him and gathered his shirt in its fists as it pulled him through and out to a life without us in it. But for Isadora’s part, there had not been grief.

He wouldn’t be the first to wander off, to catch his reflection looking at him funny and hear it say something like, Is this the life you want? Forever?

I’d caught him hypnotized a few different times by that point, listening to whatever his inverse had to say while his clippers whirred idle over the bathroom sink; listening the way I sometimes did when mine told me to leave him and never look back. By the time the swamp water settled I was sure I’d expected it to happen all along. He passed from Isadora’s life like a tantrum, or a fever. In the months that followed she didn’t find him absent in any way he hadn’t already been, and if he had not reappeared in my mirror this morning, I might have learned to feel the same.

I shoo the memory like a gnat and scan the children’s faces for a glimpse of my daughter’s. The clouds are only darkening. I’d like to pull out of here before it pours.

It’s a damp Florida September, the ozoned armpit of hurricane season, and all any of the patients can talk about at the ob-gyn is the storm that started tearing up the Greater Antilles overnight. It’s the same every year: a rush of cancelled appointments as the anxious evacuate the cone of probability, and a checklist of calls advising the especially ripe ones to admit themselves before the storm hits. In the coming days the hospitals will swell as every expectant mother in the area worries
herself into labor. The only difference is me—the way the scrubs I won’t pay to replace grow tighter each year, the way my neck grows tighter along with them.

Isadora climbs in, noise at her back.

“Can we have a hurricane party?” she asks, tucking her bag between her knees and the glovebox. Her gray sweatshirt is speckled dark with rain, her black hair pixied the way her father wouldn’t like.

I won’t lie; I miss it long. I want to tell her this. I don’t.

“Who gave you that idea?”

“Mercedes said her family puts chairs in the yard to watch, and one time her dad almost got hit by a flying domino table.”

She lifts my metal water jug from the cupholder, a habit I enable by refilling it fresh from the work fountain each afternoon. I know the names, but not the faces, of the kids who ran their mouths about the taking when school reconvened. Isadora had left sixth grade with a father and entered seventh without one. Laz was no superstar—his disinterest caught up with us all as she neared the age when men could let her down, and by the time I realized she was faking sleep to hear us fight, it was clear my girl had firm opinions about who her father was. Still, the kids at school didn’t help. His other self is probably with some other lady, they’d felt the need to say. It happens all the time. I mean, it’s not like they were married or anything. Mercedes was one of those people.

“She’s the ugly one with the really old parents?”

Isadora chokes. “Yeah. Like mummies.”

“We’ll see. We don’t really have a yard anymore.” She goes quiet in that strong way I don’t have to worry about and worry about anyway. The move is fresh, our patio sofas traded for a brown canal when the budget adjusted to just one income. Maybe we could have kept that patio. Maybe I
could have been louder, for her, than whatever Laz saw in the mirror. I know she doesn’t blame me, and yet in moments like these, when her disappointments muffle her like a cinderblock wall, I can’t help but look down and see a spade in my hand, thick with mortar.

#

Later, I’m showing Isadora how to drain pasta without burning herself when I receive a call from Laz’s father, a man I call El Suegro despite the lie of it because anything besides the in-law honorific feels too intimate. I tell her to put the pot down if any noodles slide into the sink as I walk away to answer.

“Paola,” he says, in a voice abused by decades as a horse show announcer. We trade the awkward stuff, the things you have to say. He asks if I need help putting up shutters.

“The complex pretty much handles that,” I tell him.

“Oh. I just thought, you know, because I still have his tools from the deck we were building. Maybe you needed those back.”

“I can always replace them.”

“Sure, sure.” A whistling breath. I picture his broom-ends of nose hair quivering as he sucks air through them. “Y la nena? She’s okay?”

I glance at Isadora over the kitchen bartop. She’s bouncing the strained noodles in a colander, shaking out the last of the water. Her face is hidden from me by the column of steam that twirls out of the sink. Already I want to get back to her. “She’s great.”

“I’d like to come see her, if that’s okay.”

I want to say, No, because you look too much like him, but then again so does she. I want to say Before you ask, I haven’t seen him, because I know he will ask, and I am not ready to admit otherwise. But I have that sensation again of bricking my daughter away, and I want to make her notice what I’m
about to do—to say, *Witness and remember this effort to keep your life running, and realize what it costs me.* I don’t. “Know what? Bring the tools. Tomorrow night before the roads get bad.”

He thanks me. I make a mocking face at the phone.

Back in the kitchen, we empty the noodles into the meat sauce, thick and magma-red. The TV says the hurricane is poised to sweep horizontally across the length of Cuba tonight, and I wonder briefly how El Suegro feels about it, whether his childhood home is still standing or will be in the morning. I imagine the storm as a dancer in a patterned flamenco dress, gathering her ruffled hems to tip-toe from island to island across trenches of sea and spinning, kicking them apart with her heels.

#

They always come out somewhere, the taken, but not the way they were. It’s the reflections that replace them; the smirking, selfish halves that lure the halves you love away. They wander out of reach and live the lives they leave you for. Sometimes—not always—the halves trapped in the mirrors find their way back.

Nicki from work talks to hers every day. She tells me about it sometimes in the mornings while I scoop coffee into the machine. Today is no exception. Our wet clogs squeak loudly on the linoleum breakroom floor and she says, “I found him somewhere new last night.”

She means Roy, her husband, who because of his thin-but-sinewy arms and briny *Salt Life* personality I have always likened to the experience of eating frog legs. He was taken shortly before Laz.

“Where’s that,” I ask, resigned.

“The rearview, on the way home.” Horrifying. She sounds excited about it. “It’s getting easier for him to find me, I think. Soon it’ll be like he never left.”

Springsteen plays over the office intercoms, crooning about how tired he is of his clothes, his
face, his circumstances. Caught between two evils—a voicemail box bulging with worry, and Nicki’s sunburned company—I decide I’ll wait until the coffee has brewed, but not a minute more. I’ll sip it alone at my desk. Nicki soured in my eyes a while back, when she confessed to being Roy’s “other woman,” not so much because she’d broken up his standing relationship, but because there hadn’t been another woman at all. Roy had been with a man, and Nicki wanted all to know how proud she was to have “turned him,” the same way El Suegro probably thought Laz had turned me, my ex from before him a woman. When Roy was taken from Nicki, his reflection beckoning him from their boat and into the coastal Atlantic, she was a wreck, wondering what could ever have drawn him from her side.

I wanted to say, Nicki, your relationship was proof of his capacity to leave you. I wanted to say, Nicki, you horrible vacant bitch. All I want to say now is, I hope you never meet the thing that took his place.

“All Laz really not found his way back yet?” she asks.

And I lie, as though I hadn’t heard him in the bathroom this morning, spitting into the reflection of the sink from his side of the mirror, and brushed my teeth without once looking up. I can’t let her know what we share.

Back in my office, my old chair’s burdened squeaking is a welcome relief. When I raise the coffee to my face I feel its warmth rise across my eyes, my forehead, and the taking comes to me again. It was partially Roy’s fault. We’d all been on the boat he leapt from, a year or so before he went overboard; myself, the front desk girls, the billing guy, the ultrasound tech, all of our partners, gathering more for each other than Nicki, the birthday girl. At some point our guys got to talking. Roy preached on about boating, how he’d come to it like sin to salvation, how it killed his aimless boredom dead. Laz couldn’t relate. “I don’t have any passions,” he said to me once. “Like, fuck is that, a passion? People like that make life sound great.”
He was a man of ideas more than actions. Landscaper; police officer; church usher. Partner. Father. He went through interests like a bee that couldn’t pollinate, crash-landing in flower after flower and lilting away without anything to show for it.

“I don’t think boating’s for me, man,” said Laz to Roy. “No offence, but this shit gets me queasy.”

“What you need,” Roy said, “is the Glades. Just grass and clouds. Horizon don’t move there.”

So I booked us a tour. I told him it was worth a shot. The airboat inclined as the motor gained speed, its front rising out of the water like we might take off. The snakelike anhingas that crowded the docks shrank from view. It was early in the day; my hair was still shower-wet and the wind felt nice. Before long we were flat again and drifting slowly through an ocean of grasses. The tour guide had his back turned when Laz stood and exited, and whatever he’d been reciting about human threats to the area trailed off with a soft *Oh, for God’s sake* that said this kind of thing happened in his boat once a month at least. Far off, the deep, grumbling bellow of an alligator. The driver refunded our tickets.

Isadora asked exactly one question on the way home.

“Why do you think he did that?”

I said, “I don’t know,” but I’d had an idea. His trajectory had been clear, like the spaghetti models all over the screens in the waiting room. All the data pointed to us as something else he’d give up on. That night I lay awake in Isadora’s bed, thinking, *Nicki had hers coming, but this?* Thinking, *How disappointing or insufferable or delusional was I, that he couldn’t put up with me to stay with his daughter?* Sometimes a situation got to be too much; this I know too well, too intimately. No one at the office will forget Mrs. Morales, who after a sixth miscarriage had drifted blankly into our family bathroom and stepped through the glass, away from a screaming Mr. Morales and all the pain they bore together. But I hadn’t been as bad as all that—had I?
Patients file in all morning, their hair and shoulders damp or soaked but never dry. I wonder if they know how fragile they are, these almost-families like huddles of chess pieces any one of them could scatter on a whim—how likely their children are to grow up and ask, *Why?*

Reception sends me a call from the school, an automated notice of storm closures. The cyclone is advancing quickly. It’s not long before the doctor tells us our office will close tomorrow as well. I glance at the photo of Isadora taped to my monitor and wish I could gather her back into myself.

#

After work, I check the rearview more than usual.

El Suegro is already waiting in the condo parking lot when I get back from the school with Isadora. I recognize his huge white pickup. He’s miscalculated which door is mine, or else couldn’t find closer parking, so I have a minute to brace myself as he walks bow-legged toward us across the slick asphalt. I wonder how long he’s been waiting. A black mustache balances on his lips like an old phone receiver in its cradle. He lowers the toolchest to the ground as Isadora runs into his arms, yelling, “Grandpa!”

“Mi cielo!” he says, trying to lift her and failing. “Look at your hair.”

“You like it?” She sweeps one hand and then the other past her ears, the way she would have tossed her hair when it was long. He laughs. He has always treasured her—enough, in her eyes perhaps, for both he and Laz, but not in mine.

The old man and I kiss cheeks. He smells like hardware, like two-by-fours. The collar of his plaid short-sleeve wilts with moisture. “Thanks for bringing that over.”

“Of course.”

Isadora regards the chest. “You’re not staying?”

“Mami,” I say before he can speak, “Grandpa’s got lots of storm things to do today. Go put
the leftovers on the stove and come say goodbye, okay?”

She obeys.

When she is gone, El Suegro says, “Are you sure you don’t want to shelter at my house?”

“I think we’ll be okay.” I stoop and hoist the toolchest off the ground. The air is muggy and close. I can feel my scrubs saturating from the inside and out, sweat and humidity steeping into the fabric. I’m going to smell during dinner. I’m reminded of a word Isadora brought home—*petrichor*, I think—and it might apply if El Suegro weren’t here, but it feels too nice for a conversation I don’t want to have in a parking lot running with streaks of algae and motor oil. I have a feeling he’s going to push the issue, mention Laz’s empty childhood bed or the state-of-the-art generator he probably purchased the in the latest model. I worry he’ll ask, again, whether I have seen his son, and I worry I’d give the truth away even in lying. I am thoroughly surprised when he says, “I saw him today.”

I stare, and he searches my eyes. “Tell me you didn’t come just to say that where my daughter would hear.”

His eyes widen, Laz’s same clear blue. “He’s still in this city. Don’t forget she’s his kid, too.”

“She’s happy without him.”

“Every girl needs her father.”

Isadora is stepping down from the wet front step. I eight-ball my mind for the thing to say next, fast enough to beat her to him, sharp enough to wound. I don’t know what would hurt him more—that the thing he encountered wasn’t actually his son, not all of him, or that Isadora was always better off without Laz in the first place. But she’s almost within earshot. What comes out startles both of us. “Don’t ruin what you have with her.”

When she arrives, Isadora reads the vacuum between me and her grandpa like a billboard. She fills it like an expert, and it hurts to realize she ever had to learn this skill at all.
After we make our goodbyes, I check a mailbox I know is empty just for a reason to be outside watching when the white pickup pulls away.

The condo is cool and dim inside. It should comfort me after a day like this, but I can’t shake the feeling of having just escaped hosting without notice. Had El Suegro so much as asked for a restroom, I think I would have died. The close call makes me realize how much junk mail I keep for the purpose of rolling into flyswatters, how many glasses we leave half-full on the counters, how many pests I’ve come to regard as an acceptable amount. The unit seems determined to invite all the wrong life into itself. The darkest rooms run hot—the laundry room, the pantry—and the toilet leaks enough to pucker the floorboards around it, conditions the roaches and silverfish make no complaint about.

And god, the silverfish. Prehistoric and horrible. They haunt the cabinets, pill around in the mugs, wriggle into the hair-thin space behind the bathroom mirror. Any moving box I take just long enough to open, the ones full of things I too rarely need, is bound to fall from my hands when I see the blue-gray arthropods squatting in my keepsakes.

I tuck the toolchest under the kitchen sink. We eat our reheated pasta and watch the latest storm updates—my ruffled dancer is wading through the Florida Straits.

At some point, before the sun is done setting, a pair of maintenance guys show up to shutter our windows. The last of the honey-colored light filling the space goes out one corrugated panel at a time, and I feel like a bug in a box full of junk, the cardboard flaps sealing shut above me.

#

We wake to howling, blissfully late.

I don’t remember when Isadora came to my bed, but I’m happy she did. She smells like warmth and sleep and breath. I rub eye crust from her cheek with my thumb, and she yawns.

Our hair piles high on our heads. We do nothing about it. We make no effort to change out
of our pajamas or put ourselves together. In my oversized shirt I relish the feeling of fabric gliding freely over this body that my scrubs would bind together.

It’s after noon when we eat cereal by the light of a cooking show. I skip the storm coverage today. What few channels I receive come to us by way of a paperclip inserted into a pinhole in the back of the TV, a trick I learned from Laz when we got our first apartment. The chef is making birria, and already Isadora is planning the grocery list for the moment the storm has passed. It’s too involved for her to resist—the hours of cooking, the careful portioning of soaked chiles and spices into a blender, the straining of the pulps, the skimming of the seasoned fat and the tortillas that fry in it. It’s a whole afternoon, this dish, and it aches to know that the draw is maximum time with me. That she would seek me out and choose a task that tethers us for hours feels like a miracle I don’t deserve, like one that might run out.

The power goes out, and the A/C with it. I rummage around through our board games and loan a mancala set from the insects nested at the bottom of the box.

We play beside an upturned flashlight, its light wide across the ceiling, and the game is perfect sound and texture against the dark, dull roar outside: cool glass marbles, waxy-smooth in our palms, ribbons of color suspended within; the knock of them into empty wooden pockets; the clack of them against each other as the pockets fill. When the rules get old we place the marbles on the lens of the flashlight and watch the ceiling change colors until the flashlight dies as well.

“I wonder what Mercedes is doing right now,” she says.

I shrug, pouring our second bowls of cereal before the milk can get warm. Isadora fans herself with one small hand. “Something ridiculous. Surfing in the street.”

“Yeah. Standing on the roof.”

“With a lightning rod.”
She laughs. “I bet her dad’s chasing after his domino table.”

The mention pulls at my frayed edges, and although I smile I can see she’s let down that her joke didn’t land. That Mercedes could tease at my daughter’s dad’s taking while her own elderly parents tight-roped over eternity makes me want to spit fire. I rise from the floor, where we’ve been playing, and say, “I’m gonna find some candles.”

I keep some in the bathroom, little lavender or eucalyptus scented votives that I sometimes light on the ledge of the tub. I don’t know until I strike the first match whether I will look at the mirror or not, but then I do, and Lazaro is there.

He stands where my reflection should be, his face illuminated by the matchstick in my fingers. It’ll blow out soon, so I light the first candle within reach and the light intensifies. His hair is exactly as it was on the airboat: a fade going shaggy between haircuts. His goatee is not as full as his father’s mustache, but it is just as dark. His blue eyes sparkle in the orange light. He wears the expression he wore in the early days when I scolded him for swinging Isadora’s carrier too high or overheating the formula. So help me, he looks sorry.

“Baby.” His voice trails behind his lips by half a second.

I shake my head. I want to say Go away and Stay forever.

I want to say How dare you leave me loneliness when there is so much I can’t be selfish about right now.

I want him to explain why it should be my fault that not only could I not provide Isadora with a father who stayed, but that I’d also failed to grant her a father she’d even miss when he left.

I find that I don’t have to say any of it. The thing in the mirror knows.

And the things it says are stupid and impossible and perfect, each of them either true once or something I believed was true once. I’m not going anywhere. This is my chance. I’ve always wanted a little girl. It’s the same trick Nicki falls for; the one El Suegro wants for me. The parts I conjure back are a
mirage, so many what-ifs and if-onlys. All the real parts do the leaving. Knowing this, I still can’t look away.

Isadora is in the mirror then, standing behind him—no, behind me.

I swivel to see her with my own eyes. The candle in my hand throws light at the bathroom door, where she peers at me in wide alarm. I start to move toward her and she dips away. I’ve ruined it all. When I look back at the mirror, Lazaro is gone too. My own face floats alone in the dark. I take the other votives and exit the bathroom, placing them like beacons throughout the house. I find her hugging her knees beside the mancala board, as though we both might forget what just happened if I just found her where I left her.

When I lower myself to her side, knees popping, she says, “He visits me, too.”

I can’t meet her eyes. I force myself to.

“Do you like that he does that?”

She shakes her head. “No. But its okay if you do.”

The candles are good and smelly now, the hot wax sighing vanilla and sandalwood and chamomile and patchouli into the small, tightly sealed apartment. My girl takes light from every direction. The sheen on her face and neck has her flashing like a jewel. “I think I do miss him,” I say at last. “But that’s not him. You know that, right?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Will you help me with something?”

I lead her to the kitchen, where I slide Laz’s toolchest from under the sink and hand her a hammer from within it. For a second she probably thinks it’s for smashing, until I rattle a box of nails out of the junk drawer. She helps me wrestle a threadbare sheet from a still-packed box of linens in the hot, humid pantry and I have to flick a silverfish from the fabric, chuckling meanly as I imagine
how bewildered it must feel as it soars through the dark. Our last stop is the bathroom again. I peek inside first, and she does not follow until I announce the coast is clear. The mirror is dark and empty except where the two of us fill it. I climb onto the sink with the sheet, hammer, and the first nail, and she passes the rest up to me until the mirror is tightly covered from corner to corner, the hammer blows ringing staccato in the tight space.

The rain sounds like rice striking the shutters for another couple of hours before it subsides. The quiet is sudden and complete. I shepherd Isadora out the front door and, though we can’t see much of anything in the pale moonlight, I figure we’re standing in the eye.

I hold her tight to my side, our legs and feet bare on the welcome mat. Lightning flashes somewhere far enough away that the thunder doesn’t reach us. I spare a thought for all the babies being born today to mothers so worried for them that their bodies couldn’t help but hurry them into the world. I’ll get to meet them all soon as they’re paraded into the office in the coming months. I let myself get excited.

We stand there until the rain picks up again. Stormwater brims steadily from the gutters, veiling us, and in the near-total darkness it reflects nothing at all.
DEAD & DYING CONDORS

Ashamed of her own impatience, Milagros watched her mother fill a suitcase with nonsense. She wished she could focus on something else—checking the rest of her childhood home, maybe, for anything she could still put in a box to label and stack, or calling her wife Naz about what they’d do for dinner on the first night of the old woman’s stay—but all she could do was watch as Alma stuffed items into her luggage at random, as if without seeing them.

Heeled shoes, fine dresses. Disused shapewear. A thick winter coat she’d never need again, her days leaving Florida finished.

“Let me help you,” Milagros said.

“Don’t hurry me.”

Sunset lit Alma’s window blinds like the grates of a furnace. “I wanted to see the tree before we go. It’s getting dark.”

“Pues, anda,” Alma said. “I’ll finish this.”

Milagros had to step carefully. How to facilitate a goodbye when she couldn’t tell Alma it was the end? The family lime tree had stood nearly fifty years, planted before Alma was a widow, when her mind was still intact, and the damn thing had grown exactly as Naz said: down into the septic tank, cracking it to the point of rupture. Alma’s sinks gurgled with sewage. There was only one thing to do at that point, and as her dementia worsened Alma would sooner live ankle-deep in waste than see the tree harmed.

It wasn’t like the tree meant nothing to Milagros. She’d grown up in its shadow. She’d pulled limes from its canopy on her father’s shoulders, before he died, while Alma knelt below. She’d learned her neighbors’ faces delivering the citrus in plastic bags. Fair enough, Milagros never bonded with the tree the way Alma had, but that hadn’t made its removal easy to plan, or the lie easy to tell.
It’s just for a few days, while they come fix your plumbing.

Alma couldn’t know it, but she’d never spend a night there again. When the plumbing was done, the house would list. Eventually Milagros’s leave would dry up, or her patience, and a nurse would come to the high-rise in Brickell where Alma would live until—until. Just a bit longer, Milagros would learn to say. There’s been a complication. Something burst and there’s flooding. Getting a permit takes time. Things have to be done to code. This instead of reminding Alma that she’d signed over the deed, that she’d agreed to live-in care. They say not to remind; that it’s best just to comfort. These days, convincing Alma of anything was easier than ever, and the reason killed Milagros every time.

“Just come out back with me,” Milagros said. “We’ll try to find something new to take with you.”

Alma wouldn’t look at her. “Y pa que? Whatever’s there is only for you, now. Not that you want it.”

Milagros chewed her lip. New tactic, then. The magic was clearly a sore spot, and why shouldn’t it be? They’d both known Milagros would inherit it someday, but Alma was supposed to be dead by then. Receiving her birthright while Alma lived was like watching a fist curl and stiffen with rigor. There was a time when Alma’s gifts frightened Milagros—all those times she’d watch from behind her father’s knees as Alma communed with the husks of dead lizards, or a smashed baby bird storm-flung from its nest, its memories containing little more than its pain and the warmth of its siblings, blindness and the sound of its heart. There were times—like when Milagros, still believing in the tooth fairy, found Alma hunched like a ghoul at her bedside, hands clam-shelled around the pearl of lost baby tooth, empty-eyed in the grasp of the visions it brought her—that Milagros hoped she never received the gift at all, so she’d make no museum of a child or its past. But now, filling as Alma emptied, Milagros thought she would dig up the old dogs buried in that very yard if it meant Alma
could read their bones again, for a little while longer.

Milagros sat at the edge of the bed. What would it take? She watched Alma empty another drawer and knead its contents into the suitcase. Alma’s were weeding hands, roughened on roots. Callused hands, heavy where they struck. Now Alma touched each garment like her hands were made of chalk, and Milagros wondered what it meant that some of her memories of Alma already began with the prefix “in life.”

When Alma left to gather her toiletries, Milagros stood and swapped the finery for house slippers, practical underwear, faded tees.

#

Alma wasn’t stupid. How much theft was a woman expected to tolerate? She kept few treasures, granted, and what she did treasure held no interest for her grown, ungrateful daughter, but it was obvious now to the point of comedy that Milagros was stealing from her.

Petty things. Mundanities. Alma’s belongings had all vanished from sight.

The piles of boxes in the living space were marked in handwriting she couldn’t read. Milagros claimed the clutter was going into storage for Alma’s safety—it was true, these walks from bed to bath had often bruised her shins—but honestly. All she had left was her bed and towels. Alma hadn’t felt so disoriented since the last time the house was empty, sometime in the eighties, when at least she’d had Ysidro to fill it with her, his pocket full of lime seeds to plant. They’d had a sapling before a sofa or mattress.

What did Milagros want with that tree all of a sudden? Was she feigning interest for Alma’s sake?

Alma knew she was going, knew very well that her mind was an egg wobbling slow for the counter’s edge, but that she now invited comfort like an invalid or a child was a shame she didn’t
know how to bear.

In the bathroom, Alma bent into the cabinet under the sink for the case she always traveled with, its black material stained with pale clouds of spilled lotions, toothpastes, powders. She hadn’t traveled, or therefore needed the bag, in years, but she kept her treasures in it now: the handful of once-living things her fading magic still allowed her to commune with. Bones, beaks, and feathers; fur and severed feet; her daughter’s baby teeth and umbilical cord, locks of hair. Alma saw the bag’s shape in the back of the cabinet and reached. It collapsed beneath her hand, empty.

Alma pulled it out, confused, and opened the zipper, pulled the opening wide as it would go to let the evening light stream over the white splotches inside.

Her treasures weren’t there.

Unease, then anger, then the awareness that she may have misplaced them herself. Anger again that she could not remember. Anger, differently, when it began to seem most likely that Milagros had moved them.

“Milagros!” she called. “Milagros!”

Her daughter hurried into the bathroom. Alma looked up at her and took in her wide-eyed concern, like Alma had called out of need rather than fury. Milagros may as well have stomped on her knuckles.

Alma held the bag open in the space between them. “¿Qué has hecho con mis cosas?”

Milagros blinked down at her. “Mami, we packed those away together. They’re coming with us to my place.”

“Sí, seguro.” Alma asked to be shown. Milagros tried to tell her the items were safe, that this bag was for her pills and toothbrush and hairbands and why didn’t the two of them go ahead and gather those things up now, before it got too dark? But Alma would not be moved. “I want you to
show me.”

Milagros sighed and led the way. The bush of her ponytail was highlighted to hell, the natural black lifted chemically blond, but Alma could still see the grays creeping in among her curls. Milagros had always been one to abuse her hair; chopping and coloring, even shaving it once. How she loved to resist all Alma did to know her. Alma’s own hair, sleek and strong in a long, white braid, no longer sang with memory when Alma touched each knot like a rosary bead, and it brought Alma pleasure to think of Milagros one day grasping for the memories she’d cut or dyed away.

#

They’d been so close. Milagros returned to the living room and began unstacking boxes. Blue light wafted in through the large bay window where she’d often sat with a puzzle or coloring book, surrounded by drifts of fallen termite wings. The sunset over Driftwood Acres was little more than lipstick on a glass, the day drunk down to nothing.

She knew exactly where to find the things her mother was looking for. Just a few days prior, the pair had scoured each of Alma’s little caches—under the sink, over the armoire, behind this picture frame or that one—and placed the old woman’s dead artifacts in a single box for safekeeping. Milagros had made sure to involve Alma in this, hoping to avoid a scene like the one come to pass. So much for that. And now, the added dread of touching these items and seeing the memories they carried, memories only Alma had been able to access for as long as Milagros had known about them. Whose hand would they answer to today, when Alma had already declined so much further in a mere week? How would the old woman react?

Milagros had placed light things on top of the treasures. A box of pillows, vacuum-bagged flat. One full of plush throws that smelled of dust. Scrawled across the flaps of the bottom box was MOM’S THINGS, and Milagros’s Catholic school cursive came apart in quadrants as she knelt and pulled the
flaps open.

Dead tissue, human and animal. Photo albums full of feathers, with inscriptions on where they were found. A small Badia spice shaker full of child’s teeth—the few Alma had managed to gather before Milagros began throwing them away, her attempts to keep her thoughts secret from Alma’s abilities. A faint regret ached against Milagros’s chest, like a thumb held to a bruise. Milagros allowed herself a moment to imagine she’d have been a different child to Alma if she could, but that was a lie. Alma had earned the daughter she got. She even got off lucky; as bad as things ever were, Milagros would respect Alma’s final wishes. She hadn’t once considered putting Alma in a home.

“Ya ves?” Milagros said. “It’s all here.”

Alma peered into the box on the ground, unable to crouch. “Raise it, let me see.”

In moments like these, Milagros would have found Naz’s gaze. Nobody understood how Alma made her feel quite like Naz did—not anymore, anyway, since Milagros’s dad died. Naz had taken that torch from him beautifully. She would’ve said something funny now, to defuse the tension. Better yet, she would’ve said, “I got it, señora,” and lifted the box herself, held it open for Alma to peruse while Milagros took a walk to calm down. But ever since Alma started getting bad—really bad—something had reverted. Alma treated Naz like it was still the early days, before they’d spent twenty-five years pulling down walls, loving each other. She treated Naz like a stranger. Would her body remember the love they shared, if Milagros touched it dead? Alma’s hair, her nails? Her bones?

Milagros lifted the box. She supported its edge against her belly and leaned forward to afford Alma the best view. Alma reached inside and selected a Ziploc of termite wings, ones swept from the bay window itself.

“Don’t open that,” Milagros pleaded.

“Por que no?”
“You’ll make a mess. We need to go soon.” Milagros shifted the box to support it with one hand. “Here,” she said, reaching for a long, black feather, its edge like the teeth of a comb. “Hold this instead.”

But when she touched the feather her mother’s living room disappeared entirely, replaced by the visions of the bird it once belonged to.

#

It felt fitting, Alma thought, that she’d live to see this taken as well.

She saw a look overtake Milagros and recognized it immediately, though her own eyes hadn’t seen it in a generation. It was exactly as Ysidro used to describe her own face, when Alma found herself bathed in the current of a vision—eyes blank and serene, posture relaxing, her lips parted in reverence. The corners of Milagros’s lined mouth twitched upward. Alma remembered well the exhilaration that feather brought her each time she held it. She’d memorized the waxy texture of its quill, the down at the base, the stiff curvature of its edges. The vision it gave her had never so much as dulled, and even though she’d never again see it herself, Alma knew: Milagros was flying.

That was alright. Or would be, so long as Alma still had the rest of the memory, the parts Milagros couldn’t see. How long would that stay with her? The rest of the bird, the lakeshore, the sounds of a festival; the face of Ysidro, bold-browed and handsome. They’d been only children. It was the day they’d met.

He’d worn a plain tee, she a dress her mother embroidered for Alma to dance in during a procession for the Virgin. Faithful shoulders marched an idol of the saint from one part of Puno to another. The streets were impacted. Noise-makers twirled, ratcheting horribly, music blared, and Alma became overwhelmed. She fled. The commotion didn’t abate until the narrow alleys delivered her onto a beach, where the boy she’d marry and leave the country with knelt over the form of a dead condor.
He’d called to her, and she’d let him watch while she used her gift.

Milagros knew this story—or she’d heard it, surely, whether she remembered the details or not. She tended not to listen unless Ysidro did the telling.

So dismissive of her roots, the child had always been. Agringada from the start; the first of many tolls Alma would pay for moving to the States. The white wife was another. Nazareth, Naz, a name Alma’s teeth couldn’t even finish properly, the ζ becoming s every time. Hers had not been a good first impression. When the lime tree was already a decade in the ground, Naz had observed how the roots would someday sprawl wide over the buried septic system and said, “You know, that’ll be a problem down the line.”

How natural the instinct had seemed, Alma thought, to point out a treasure and condemn it. How easily she’d come to pillage Milagros away, too—as if she’d looked at the house and grounds, at Alma and Ysidro, and said, Look at those roots, they’ll choke you someday. So much Naz would never understand. Appreciating things like the tree and its history, for one. Milagros’s responsibility to her family, for another. The gift she’d inherit: a yoke passed to eldest daughters, of giving voice and vessel to perishing things, perishing ways.

And yes, of course, Alma knew Milagros would have no eldest daughter with Naz.

When Alma’s Tia Ignacia died childless at the dinner table, and the gift came to Alma as she held the woman’s cooling hand, she learned the true nature of Ignacia’s relationship with her housemate Roxana. The memory had come nested in quilts of such beauty, a secret delivered to Alma’s protection like an infant swaddled and warm. She understood her aunt then, and never told a soul until Ysidro, when Milagros turned out the same way. It was different, though, when it concerned her own child. Her only child. Who would receive the gift now, after Milagros? Who would pass anything, anything, to anyone, when they both were gone? What part had the white wife played in that?
Alma seemed to remember having made a peace with these questions, but now that seemed like an almost laughable impossibility. The woman had taken everything, down to Alma’s lineage. Alma would die and so would everything else.

Alma grabbed the bag of termite wings and shook them out over the inside of the box, the floor, the soft rise and fall of Milagros’s chest.

#

When the vision passed, Milagros tried to orient herself. Where a moment ago there’d been wilderness—aerials of mountain ranges shrouded in clouds, forests veined with brown rivers, deserts crossed with ancient geoglyphs—there was now only Alma’s darkening living room. She still held the box but its contents had changed. She was covered in silvery wings.

Her phone was ringing. She lowered the box to the ground.

“Word from the tree guy,” Naz said on the phone. “All set for the morning.”


“How are things at the house?”

“We’re all packed, if that’s what you mean. Mom’s been mostly lucid, I guess.” Milagros looked down at her own chest, where tear-shaped wings stuck to her dewy skin. She tried to bat them off, and each swipe brought her the wings’ memories: of her own child-self watching her father mow the lawn, or the sounds of old TV shows, raised voices, laughter, songs. The wings remembered what the neighborhood looked like across the years, the renovations and landscaping jobs and even the budding wealth a new hotel had begun to attract in recent years, an eyesore shaped like a guitar. The effect was like soap dispelling oil, the new crashing in waves against Alma’s crumbling old house.

With the night at full dark, the spotlight built into the guitar hotel’s neck would turn on any minute. Milagros would have to go soon.
“Are you ready for us?” she asked.

“Bring it.” Her Naz. “I was mainly calling to settle the food situation. Should we take her out?”

Crouching for the empty Ziplocs at her feet, Milagros said, “After last time?”

Naz snorted. When a shiny new restaurant opened near Milagros, a place called Colibri right on the beach, they’d taken Alma hoping to treat her. She’d complained the whole night—the chef wasn’t even Peruvian, she found out after grilling a server, and she’d found her churrasco offensive. She’d spat it into a napkin and crossed her arms.

It gave Milagros an idea, though, a scheme to draw her outside and chance a meal her mother would eat.

She tasked Naz with a quick grocery trip and said she’d be back soon.

Milagros found her mother trying the kitchen faucet, which groaned and spat. What drops fell out were the color of weak tea. Alma asked what was wrong with the pipes.

“Ma, come help me pick some limes,” Milagros answered. “We’ll make ceviche Papi’s way. You have to show me how.” It was a long shot, she knew; recently she’d known Alma to shape beef into drumsticks and call it chicken wings, or boil whole basil leaves for tea. She’d wrest dinner prep away from her later that night, but for now it was enough that Alma made for the kitchen exit without another word and opened the door to the shit-flooded yard, where a haze of mosquitos whined in the dark and the tree stood awaiting its sentence.

#

Perhaps there was hope after all, of a decent meal during Alma’s time away. She was disappointed, naturally, that Milagros retained nothing even Ysidro had taught about choosing good limes, but at least it guaranteed Alma the final say.
Alma entered the yard ahead of Milagros, who closed the door behind them. The ground gave under her feet, spongy and wet. The night air was thick and foul.

The neighbor’s floodlights clicked on, shining through the branches of the canopy, which billowed out and even touched the ground in places like a wind-widened skirt. Limes hung planetary in the dark, green crescents catching light from one side. Beyond the canopy the sky was light-polluted, a dusty plum-brown, and in the distance, a stark white line cut the sky clean in half.

“Qué es?” Alma asked.

“Hm?” Milagros squinted, shaking out a pair of plastic grocery bags.

“Esa luz.”

Milagros lifted her chin to the near-starless sky. “The casino, Ma. It has a spotlight.”

The Ma meant it should have been obvious, Alma knew. Something she’d forgotten. She reached into the dark for a lime and probed its dimpled surface, prodding and squeezing for firmness the way Ysidro always had. She thought of his square hands rubbing dirt from those pores at the kitchen sink, how he’d used to waggle his dark, grill-mark eyebrows at her in anticipation of the meal to come. How those brows faded when he sickened.

Her thoughts carried her from the limes to an old family dinner table, the one at which Tía Ignacia had died, and eventually the one where Alma’s mother and sisters received Ysidro over a round of ceviche—made properly, of course, piled with cooked yams and wide, pale corn. Back and back the current went, to the sand of the lakeshore where the down at the dead condor’s neck caught the breeze and grit found its way into the pink-gray of its bunched jowls. Back still to the rocking of the saint, carried on her supplicants’ shoulders a short distance and back. Alma wore no silk mantel, but fancied herself on the throne of that Madonna now, a thing to be carted about. Before the conquest, the Incas did the same with their mummies, their kings. She laughed—now that was more like it: Alma
crowned with a half-moon of hammered gold, turquoise heavy in her earlobes and a scepter in her fist.

The rustling of a grocery bag brought Alma present. Milagros was snatching limes off the tree at random.


Milagros’s eyes were bright under the canopy. Sad. Maybe even a little betrayed, like when the funeral was open-casket though Ysidro asked for closed, withered as he was by the end, and Milagros had to end the visions by prying Alma’s warm hands from his cold ones. Her daughter’s face had shattered her. She’d always envied their access to each other, but that, she knew, was too far. They didn’t speak for months.

Perhaps Milagros was thinking of him now, finding him in the limes he had grown. The fight Alma expected fell to the ground in slow hammock shapes, like a petal.

Alma reached again, filling her bag. A peace offering, then, is what these limes would become, and a token from home in a faraway land. When this business with the plumbing was done and she returned from the inverted night of downtown, where the streets from Milagros’s skyscraper balcony shone with their own kind of odd constellations, at least this would be as she’d left it—the home she’d left her family for and grown a family in, the locus of her legacy, her empire undisturbed.
BURROWING CREATURES

Before we moved through the rift, the apartment I lived in with Papi had walls of landlord white. I never minded. The neighbor who sat me had white walls too, and on our trips to the library while Papi cut hair at the shop, she gave me money to scan photos out of nature books and hang the monochrome printouts at home. The music Papi played when he came home was a kind of paint—cumbias and ballads and folk tunes, songs he said my mami liked before she died and older songs he heard on his parents’ knees, back in Peru. Those songs felt orange to me. Like Papi’s camotes or dusk on a west-facing coast. Like the beach photos he showed me of all the relatives he and Mami left behind. He played the usual songs on the ride down Alligator Alley the day he took me to see the property he’d bought in Cape Coma, the place inside the rift.

The exit wasn’t even paved back then, the Gulf Coast rift itself so new. First one discovered in Florida. What little I knew about them I learned from Papi.

“Extra land,” he explained. “Magic land, where anything you bury will grow.”

It was the summer before third grade. I dozed in my booster that day, but Papi woke me to see the rift as it neared. White seams where the road ended, an upside-down T. The two sides of the opening dragged over the windshield like curtains as we entered. The inside was car-wash colorful and just as noisy, loud enough to drown out our music. The other side was a boring quilt of wide roads and construction sites and scrubby grasses full of skinny trees and scorpions.

Papi took me to the place our house would go. Orange flags poked out of a weirdly uniform hill.

“Aquí ponemos tu cuarto,” he said with his toe in the dirt, and the beginnings of a house rose just where he said, a maze of planks in the shape of a floorplan. We watched the house labor itself from the earth and I wondered what he’d buried to grow it, but only dimly, because the sun was
setting, and Cape Coma had a west-facing coast, and the orange that settled across the grass and our hill and our faces was the same orange I found in Papi’s songs. I trusted it. At the end of the summer, when the house was all grown, and our white apartment was packed, and the sitter’s library-borrowed nature DVD was safely smuggled into my bag because I didn’t know if the Cape had a library yet, Papi and I moved in, and I was excited for the ways we might grow: dug from old lives, planted like potato halves, slice-down and warted with eyes.

#

For the last week of summer, I played alone. If I wasn’t helping Papi clean the construction dust out of the corners and windowsills like afterbirth, I was rolling in the grass or spinning in the street while a second house finished knitting together on a neighboring hill that I almost had to visor my eyes to see, like an explorer. I practiced burying things. I brushed dirt over my stack of black and white library printouts and watered the mound, and days later I dug up the same pages but in full color, which I pinned to my walls. I learned that if I stayed still too long—reading on the lawn, or waiting for the bus—the Cape would take it as a cue and do its best to copy me. I’d find an indent in the grass beside my own, the same size. On cool mornings the fog studied my shape and mimicked it. That’s the best it could do with people. One day a boy stood in front of that second house, pivoting slowly with his feet planted and something held to his face. Whatever it was, he aimed it at me.

“Tenemos vecinos,” Papi said that afternoon, folding my ear to make room for his clippers. My summer hair tufted to our new kitchen floor.

“I saw one of them, I think,” I said.

“Did you say hello?”

I shook my head. Papi scolded me not to move. His voice and the machine echoed in the near-empty house, down to the corners of the rooms our old furniture felt too small in. “I’ll visit while
you are at school.”

The boy’s name was Lucas. He showed me the footage at the bus stop on Monday while we waited in currents of fog. The camcorder caged in his gnawed fingertips looked glossy even in the flat predawn light, and on the view display his slow, grainy zoom onto my face from his end of the street made my mouth open wide. Across from us, the fog arranged itself to match our silhouettes: his offered hands, my bent neck. On the bus, kids gawked over seatbacks at the gadget Lucas held, and when he showed them my video and said, “Yeah, we’re making a movie,” the aperture of their favor widened to fit me as well.

Huddled close to him, I asked, “Are we making a movie?” and he said, “Do you want to?” and I said yes, and the matter was settled, and he turned to film the passengers’ fog selves chasing behind the bus before the sun burned them away.

#

The first time I visited Lucas’s house, after Papi did, all the baffling adult words he said about Lucas’s dad being a man who “makes businesses happen” took on a shape I could recognize, like seeing our doubles rise out of fog. The shape was this: they were people with money.

“Pick something,” Lucas said, sweeping his arm across the inset shelving around his family’s TV, the long back of which disappeared into an alcove like the house had grown around it. Disks and tapes lined the walls in crisp cases. Nothing familiar. At home we only watched what we could intercept on the antennas Papi made from paperclips and foil. When I couldn’t pick anything, Lucas chose a tape with a dirty word in the title, or so I thought, which turned out to be about a ship that sinks, and I thought we would watch on his living room couch, but he took it instead to his bedroom to play on a second TV, ceiling-mounted with buckles and straps. He talked all the way through. I listened hungrily, about miniatures and sets and wrecks and submersibles, despite all I already knew.
about the sea from my nature docs. When one character sketched another in a dimly lit room and Lucas paused it to place his fingers on the woman’s stuttering VHS nipples, it would only be the second time I hid something out of Papi’s reach. My second secret.

On the way out, Lucas’s dad complimented my hair. It made me self-conscious. My fade played well on the southeastern coasts but felt finnicky next to Lucas and his brothers’ blunted, shaggy bangs, their plain unbranded clothing. All my former camouflage felt useless.

“My dad did it,” I said.

“I know,” said Lucas’s dad. “He said he was good, but here’s the proof. No wonder he wants to open a shop.”

That world—our dads’ world, of hands shaken and money exchanged, of contracts and loans—existed through a rift of its own, barred to my understanding by a loud, pulsing channel of pressure and light, unreachable then as the home I’d left behind. I didn’t yet know what drove people like him, drawn to the Cape not because his means carried better there, but because land that fresh sinkholed easily into pockets like his.

#

That night Papi buried Mami’s earrings. The backyard stretched a ways, the limits of our lot delineated by tall amber wiregrass, punctuated with scrawny trees, and he crouched as close to the border as he could, scooping at the earth with one cupped hand. He dropped the jewelry into the hole like fat, pearlescent seeds and tamped over them again.

I was taller than him when he knelt. The perspective felt wrong. His square hands, more familiar dirty than clean, stayed folded over the mound where I imagine he hoped Mami would grow—like the house he’d bought us, like the boy he’d moved into it, like the business he’d gone to Lucas’s father about starting. The sky reddened fast overhead, a slapped cheek, and even when I noticed a
disturbance moving closer, parting the grass in a slow, deliberate line, Papi would not lift his terracotta face to mine.

#

At school, some friends the camera bought us couldn’t decide what game to make of the hole under the playground. They waved us under the plastic rock-wall. Its topside was too hot to climb under the August sun, so we huddled in the cool underneath, a tyrannosaur fossil stamped into the plastic that curved over our heads and concealed us from the teachers. This was for the best—the hole was big enough to stick a hand into, but dark enough not to want to, and the threat of having our curiosity kneecapped made us zip our lips and drop imaginary keys into the black depths of the hole itself.

“This can be in my movie,” Lucas said, fishing the camera from one bottomless cargo pocket. “Pretend you’re looking for treasure.”

The other boys were quick to task, crafting a makebelieve about a cursed amulet and a dinosaur archaeologist who must have suffered some awful consequence, petrified into the plastic backdrop.

“This must be where he started digging!” said one.

“What if it’s boobytrapped?” said another.

“Only one way to find out,” said the first, lofting a wide piece of mulch toward the hole, and I broke my silence.

“What if it’s a burrow?” I said.

Lucas lowered the camera from his eye. “Dude, you ruined it.”

“What kind of burrow?” said the one with the mulch, who I’d learn was called Dean. I told him what I could remember from the DVD I stole, the one my sitter was probably accruing fines over from the library—the first secret I kept from my father, who’d already asked me about it once when
she called looking for it. If only I could watch it again, to compare all the burrows I listed to the hole in the ground. Moles, armadillos, owls, gophers, gopher tortoises; Lucas perked up at this one, telling us how his dad came home complaining about all the trouble they posed to developers like him. I felt the tug of Lucas’s jealousy when Dean ignored him and asked, “How do you know so much animal stuff?”

“I have this DVD,” I said.

He asked if he could see, and Lucas found his opening. “We can watch at my house;” he said. “He has nothing to play them on.”

It stung, but he paid for it; the boys that’s-okayed him and played something else. I came and watched, though, for myself more than Lucas’s company. I missed the animals. I missed hearing the narrator’s voice, the familiar musical cues, and I knew of no other way to conjure that comfort than in his glittering house. At the end of an hour on burrowing creatures, with Lucas trying hard at disinterest, the narrator’s use of elusive had lit something in his mind, the challenge of a thing he couldn’t see or have. The film—our film—Lucas decided, would be about the Cape’s own burrows, the lives they concealed. Finding the animals. Discovering nests. I would have been thrilled, had he not used the word hunt.

#

All around Cape Coma, hills rose out of flat land and swelled until businesses split out of them—Walmart, Kohl’s, Carrabba’s—the way dragonflies, I’d learned, burst from their own molted backs. Papi’s shop was one of them. He buried his first pair of scissors to grow it, plus a loan from Lucas’s dad. He came home happy, smelling like Barbicide and buoyed by borrowed money. We went shopping, had nice dinners, bought new clothes. We shed Broward County like mylar blankets, the flashy remains of a crisis. When he pulled out a chair and readied a cape to shape up what hair I had
grown, I declined, and he only looked hurt for a moment. Every night, Papi watered the earrings. Every night, something stirred in the grass.

Eventually a hardware store opened, and Papi took me to choose paint colors. I hadn’t even thought about painting; it had been forbidden at our last place.

He held swatches up for me in the light, while I clung to the front end of a cart filled with stirrers and rollers and paint trays. He took the lead for most of the house, but I could pick anything for my room, and the choice was easy. I scanned the displays for my perfect orange. Papi stared at it a while, and at me. “Your Mami loved this color,” he said. He held my hand while the paint shaker rattled my color together, and at home we spent the afternoon moving things away from my walls and taping up the baseboards. This is how he found the DVD I stole, left carelessly under the bed.

“Is this the one Mirta is looking for?” he said. “De la biblioteca?”

I stared at his feet.

“Te estoy hablando.”

Our eyes met. I nodded, and he crouched.

“We don’t steal things, papito. We borrow. And we give back. Hm?” He waited for me to nod again and told me he’d mail it back to her in the morning, after I’d written an apology to send with it. He wiped the tears from my face and said we could keep painting my room if I promised not to steal ever again. I didn’t know it was a lie when I said it.

The last things to clear away were the printouts pinned to the walls. I stacked them on my dresser, and my room became a dusk one pass of the rollers at a time. Papi played his music loud. When the walls dried, I didn’t hang the papers back up—they looked dull now, against all that color. I set them aside, crumpled and pinholed, and when the Cape realized I’d discarded its gift, the colored ink fell from the pages as black dirt, leaving only the monochrome pages I’d first planted in the yard.
Lucas collapsed his first burrow on a field trip at the tidal flats. We padded onto the wet-cement sand in water shoes, smelling of sunscreen, stepping over veinlike streams and watching for crabholes—some of us more than others. Mangrove roots poked up from the muck (“knees,” the guide told us, though they looked like fingers), and shorebirds prowled large among them like the chaperones prowling large among us, slow and long-legged, their arms arcing toward our worksheets like the curlews’ long beaks. They split us into groups. I joined two girls from a different teacher’s class, identifying worms and bivalves by their tunnels and mounds, marking each on my sheet, giving them human names, waving goodbye, muttering to myself in the narrator’s accent, feeling like my documentaries had come to life. Across the flats, Dean and the other kid—was his name Adam?—made sketches while Lucas dollied his camera low across the ground.

He came to the picnic benches late, holding garbage in one fist. His lunchbox hung heavy at his side.

“Hide my trash in your lunchbox,” Lucas said, dropping his sandwich bag and Capri Sun on the table between us. The yellow straw showed like a spine in a vacuum-sucked body.

“Why?”

“I’ll show you later.”

And he did, on the bus, lifting the tin lid of his lunchbox to reveal several pounds of sand, a single upended hermit crab lying jostled on the surface. I said, “What did you do?”

He said, “Not so loud!”

Adam perched over the seatback. “Show him,” he said, and the camera came out of that bottomless pocket, and on the hinged display I saw Lucas crouch with his lunchbox held open like jaws, biting a divot out of the wet gray sand that the tide would not smooth for hours, like the trenched
fields into which our dads had sown trade. “I thought I could take his burrow with us,” Lucas said, lying. His smile; the laugh Adam tried to hide; Dean’s rolled eyes; they all blurred, my face hot. I thought of the tide rushing slow over the flats as the day waned. The cool relief of night for all the hidden creatures—sea life marching shoreward with no sun or birds to fear. Had the crab been a mother? Did a crab-dad await her in the dark, wondering where she was? Would he find a portal and cross it to seek her? Had their child known her enough to miss her, or would he follow without knowing why?

#

Papi stayed out late as the novelty of his shop wore off, hoping to draw working clientele with evening hours. At home he practiced with scissors on busts from the toy aisle, cheap Barbie heads smiling under blond bangs. His clippers sat dormant. Barbering was different there, so many fine heads patronizing his chair. In Broward he was asked for by name.

I did homework in the backyard on his late days, the house too cavernous and empty. I lay my workbooks open in the grass, watching for scorpions, watching the sun comet toward the lot of tall wiregrass that flanked us. Papi always returned before then, in time to water the earrings. Except one day he didn’t. The wiregrass pulled the sun into itself, like tentacles gathering prey. Still, he wasn’t home.

Alone, I filled a jug with the same smelly well water we bathed in. The odor was less offensive outdoors. I poured it over the spot where the earrings lay interred and watched as the wet soil began to give, sinking from the middle in collapsing rings, the earth swallowing itself until I was looking down into a depression the size of a salad bowl. Inside, white shapes sat dusted with soil, too large to be Mami’s pearls. Mushroom caps, maybe? I blew on them, not wanting to touch. It was a clutch of eggs.
Sitting on my heels, I listened for the parting of the grass.

The sky inked as the sound got closer. The floodlights clicked on, automatic, and I sat in the cone of yellow light as a gopher tortoise emerged from the wiregrass, stony and huge.

She drew herself forward on powerful legs, the meaty curves of them studded with gravelly scales that shrank as they tessellated into her shell. Her wrinkled neck supported a waxy head, her almond eyes half-lidded and glossy black. Her shell was wide, domed, caked in soil, big enough to sit on, bigger than my documentaries said this species should grow. Had the Cape grown her that way, larger than life? Had she come for the earrings? From them? She drew near and aimed her back legs at the nest, moving more earth into place where my water had collapsed it. The eggs disappeared. In another moment, so had she. The grass parted for her by itself. Her backside lumbered away in the dark. The porch door opened as the wiregrass stilled, and Papi found me outside, my hand still extended in the way I now know he understood well.

#

I almost didn’t go when Lucas’s birthday arrived, but his was the only house with a pool, and Dean said he’d go if I went. So I went. It always felt like summer in the Cape.

Papi wanted to send me with a meat for the grill, as a courtesy to Lucas’s dad, but then he said he was thinking anticuchos and I begged him to stop. I loved them, I did—skewered beef hearts in vinegar—but the last time he fed them to people my age, a girl in my kindergarten class asked what it was while she chewed, then let the morsel fall mangled from her mouth. I couldn’t bear to watch that twice.

Lucas showed us the hermit crab while his dad cleaned the pool. She was still in the lunchbox, the lid propped open over her shallow burrow, her bits of moldering fruit. He’d painted her shell. Even if she made it home, she’d be unrecognizable.
“Dad says they live longer as pets,” Lucas said.

But was that well water he poured over the sand from a cup? Was it even salted? The crab moved as he doused her, bubbles foaming at her strange little mouth. She’d be dead in no time, sick and weak until then, her armor reduced to ornament.

His dad called us to the water, where I sat with Dean at the edge of the pool, playing a dumb little game.

“Nool poodle,” Dean said. Sun caught in the dew on his face.

I answered, “Fool ploatie.”

“You just copied a pool word!”

“Okay,” I said. “Um, animals. Rackjabbit.”

Dean considered his next. “Kermit hrab.”

“Pemperor enguin.”

“Topher gortoise.”

Something fell into the soft earth of me then, a feeling for Dean I didn’t know how to recognize. That’s when Lucas’s father’s shadow scattered us. Dean went looking for a restroom while Lucas’s dad sat down next to me, his feet plunging deep into the water. He said, “Having fun, bud?”

I said yes.

“That’s good. Your old man couldn’t make it out, I see.”

“He’s at work,” I said. “He wanted me to bring you food, but—”

“Oh, we got plenty of that. No worries. But hey, would you do me a favor?” He waited for my attention. “Tell him to give me a call. Or better yet, to come see me. Can you do that?”

His head eclipsed the sun. Light haloed around his wet hair, his reddening face. Free of his unthreatening polos and office palette, his body up close was scary, animal. Veined and furred. Ruddy
where the sun had sat heavy on the shelves of his muscles. He made Papi look small as a chess piece.

“I can’t reach him, is all,” he continued. “I’m sure he’s very busy.”

“Yeah.”

“Try, though. I’d really appreciate it.” He winked.

There was commotion behind us then, and every head on the whitewashed pool deck turned to see Lucas, pointing scared, calling for his dad, screaming about a spider descending from the pool screen. Like he’d done it a million times, his dad took the long lighter from the grill and immolated the thing in front of everyone. The silk burned instantly; the spider fell on fire, its legs curling like paper, the carcass whining with heat. Stomping out the flame, he said, “I hope you all like barbecue!” and most of the pool deck laughed.

Dean found me again when the plates were passed, hot dogs and chips and Hug juice in little barrels. He said it was funny how afraid Lucas were of spiders, yet also obsessed with burrows, when spiders are known to dig them. I told him Lucas probably didn’t know. That wasn’t in the documentary.

#

Papi worked late with nothing to show. I couldn’t find it in me to relay what Lucas’s dad had said—not when Papi came home looking like he did, a deep-sea specimen out of his element, the whole of him air-pressured flat.

Dean and I spent our rotating specials period together, waiting each week for our hour in the media center, when we could pore over high-gloss photos of the wildlife around us, the spreads wide enough to cover both our laps, the cross-sectioned burrows coaxing us closer, swallowing us whole. We studied the gopher tortoise. We learned they’re known to lay their eggs in a place separate-but-near to their actual burrow, buried within reach. That would explain the yard, the grass; she must have
a home in the wiregrass field, queen of the empty lot. I told Dean about her then. He pinky-swear not to tell Lucas.

Morning bus rides grew quiet. Lucas didn’t seem to notice; he got a handheld game for his birthday. The fog kids at the stop stood farther apart every day. They didn’t bother chasing.

On the playground Dean and I watched Lucas from under the plastic rock wall, our backs to the tyrannosaur fossil. The grooves of its bones nestled into the grooves of ours. Lucas ran past filming a game of tag, one eye to the viewfinder, his other eye squinted shut. When the teacher gathered us in from recess, she stopped him to beg for caution.

“If you hit someone holding that, you’ll just hurt your own eye.”

“I'll be careful,” Lucas said. When she turned, he stuck out his tongue.

Between my crossed legs and Dean’s, the “boobytrapped” hole from that long-ago game sat full for the first time, a wolf spider’s eyes staring wet in the shade, our threat to each other an impasse.

#

Lining the major roads like carrion, shuttered businesses composted into the soil they sprang from. Papi’s shop was among the first, an early casualty of the property bubble I’d learn about as history by the time I understood such things. I was with him when he locked the door for the last time, and watched as the building disintegrated from the top down, easily as a sandcastle. Papi walked out onto what was once the middle of the floor and swiped the dirt around until he found the scissors he buried. He wiped them off, pocketed them. They were all he’d ever get back from the site.

It was in this aftermath that Papi visited Lucas’s dad. I stood by his side while he knocked. Lucas’s dad ushered mine to his lair.

I found Lucas in his room. He ignored me, playing games while Papi initialed his terms of defeat, and when Lucas stood to pee without once looking up at me, I pocketed the painted shell he
still kept in that open lunchbox, the sand it sat on dry, the paint on the shell flaking off, the body within miraculously gone.

My father regained some of his shape after that.

A wholesale opened whose roots drank of half the businesses for miles. Papi worked for it gladly, making normal hours, coming home early enough to lie on his belly with me at dusk, the uneven ground of our yard pressure-pointing our fronts. This is how he met the tortoise: face-down, level with her eyes. The grass delivered her right to his view. He fed her lettuce and berries, cleared debris off her nest. He smiled, serene. The same orange light that gilded her shell and scales lit the cracks in his face like mineral canyons. Like warm clay.

“It’s her,” he said. “She’s telling us she is here.”

But I wasn’t convinced. Who was it who’d ventured from a good home, after all, for an open place to plant his child? Who was it who’d followed an instinct and wound up exposed, at the mercy and charity of others? How like a sun our floodlights must have looked through the wiregrass. How like the rift.

Dean was with me when the clutch began to hatch. The surface of the nest warped like a thick stew as the hatchlings broke from their eggs, still buried, searching for light. We sat side by side waiting for the first to come out when Lucas called from the side of the house, having walked over from his by himself.

“You took my crab,” he said, pointing at me. He’d taken weeks to notice. I would have said so, or that it wasn’t a crab anymore but a shell, but those were admissions.

“No I didn’t.”

“Yeah, right. I bet you have it right there.” Lucas eyed the soil at our feet and squinted, his
mouth a confused parabola. “What is that?”

I tried to say it was nothing, but a hatchling had freed itself from the roil, small as our child palms, smooth and round like a party slider. The Rorschach patterns on its shell shone the yellow-green of nearly-ripe bananas. The hatchling made its feeble paddle-path to the lip of the grass, which parted for it as it did for the mother, hatched to hidden in less than a minute. Lucas’s shoulders sank, loose. His face softened. He walked all the way up to us looking straight at the nest, as if hooked by the bridge of his nose. He looked pacified, perhaps by the wonder of the scene—a climax for his film, what it had all been building to whether he knew it or not.

He said, “Let me take one.” A look at my face, then Dean’s. “You took my crab, I take a turtle. It’s fair.”

I shook my head. Dean said, “Not a chance.”

“Someone’s moving in there anyway,” Lucas said, nodding at the lot. “If I take one home before the house comes, I’ll be saving its life.”

Lucas sat between me and Dean, staring hard. The silence pulled taut. He could tell we wouldn’t budge. I thought he might hit me. I wish he had. He lunged not at me but the nest, not to grab but with fists, smashing and grinding, three, four, five quick hits, a weak sixth as Dean threw him back by his collar, as I howled Stop!, as black dirt sprayed the air and darkened the grooves of Lucas’s hands. He scrambled away from Dean and stood, reaching dirty-handed into that bottomless pocket as Dean advanced.

Like a reflex, Lucas joined the camera to his face like the siphon of some buried clam, filtering threat into evidence.

“Don’t touch me!” he said. “Try something and I’ll show my dad!”

Dean was predator-quick. He slammed the heel of his palm against the lens and Lucas
screamed, the viewfinder entering his eye. He stumbled, wailing, clutching his face. The camera thudded hard to the grass. I scrambled to pick it up, ejecting the memory card the way I’d seen Lucas do, and pitched it into the field where another house was destined to grow.

Turning away while Dean wrestled Lucas out of my yard, I knelt again and spread my hands over the wreckage of the nest, like I was testing for heat. The soil did not stir. I ran careful fingers through the gray, black, and brown, looking for babies, looking for eggs, but all I found were earrings, pearl-and-gold, struggling to shine.

#

Cape Coma filled quickly, crowding by the day. New neighbors bought up the spaces between Lucas’s house and mine until the wiregrass lot was the last open space. One final house rose up as forecasted, as though overnight, obscuring the sun long before it touched the grass and blocking that particular orange light from reaching our house from then on. I never saw the tortoise again. Others would spill out of their fields, though, all across the Cape, unable to hibernate with their burrows collapsed, overturning in our septic ditches, exploding under tires on the roadsides.

Dean’s parents kept him home for what he did, but we’d see each other when school resumed. Papi cycled out of the house and back in his nametag and vest. Lucas either didn’t tell, or his father chose not to act. What happened in the yard didn’t come up after that.

The night before school started back after break, I buried what was left of the hermit crab in the remains of the tortoise’s nest. I buried it deep and smoothed the dirt flat. I wasn’t sure what would happen, and didn’t much care; everything we’d planted since moving to the house had crumbled back to dust. I stopped visiting. Never watered the shell. Never waited for something to grow.
Mug half-done in the angled mirror, I ignore my mother’s calls to sweep blush up onto my temples, the face of Luz Divinity taking shape beneath my brush. She tries again as I lower a wig over my shaved head, the hairpiece sleek and long, and again as I zip a vinyl bodice over my chest, false cleavage painted on. I almost let the call expire, then answer on what must be the last ring, shrugging the phone against my cheek to wash lipstick swatches from the back of my hand.

“Allô, Ma.” The water runs sunset colors.

She doesn’t call me Luz, or even Louis, but Loulou, the self I wear at home. “Have you decided where you'll stay this weekend?”

Hands dry, I palm the phone in one hand taloned with press-ons. The answer is no. I’d hoped to decide later—tomorrow, after the long drive south for my niece’s first birthday, when I’d either pull into a hotel lot or my mother's manicured driveway, my brother having rescinded his offer of the pullout couch to host our dad instead. My ear warms against the screen, just as it did when Juneau broke the news.

“I'm not sure,” I tell her. “I planned to call tomorrow. I'm performing tonight.”

“You—oh.” She remembers what I do. The hot ear tickles as she sidesteps. “Well, not too late. I need to prepare.”

“Okay.”

She says it’ll be good to see me, a line she usually ruins and immediately does. “Let’s make this a nice weekend, yes? I don’t want any drama.”

My ear is fully itching when she hangs up, and I know it will molt soon, so I take my time stepping into my thigh-highs and dusting glitter over my collarbones. I’d rather it happen at home. Sure enough, the more I think on both recent conversations—my brother’s small betrayal, our
mother’s insinuation that if anyone is going to ruin this weekend for everyone, it’ll be me—the more I feel my ear prickle, the skin lifting away. Neither came as a total shock: Juneau’s talked grace about our dad before. *She deserves a grandpa, Loulu*, he once said of his newborn Fabienne, sounding more like our mom every day. *We’re only getting older.* The baby was a sudden moon, tugging his mercy like a tide. And our mother, well. Gay she could keep denying, but drag is a different offense.

Luz Divinity stares out of the mirror in full paint. I know her work tonight won’t cover hotel stay. I know, therefore, what I’ll tell my mother in the morning. The thought is enough to finish the job. I pull on my earlobe and feel the molt detach, chemically peeled by my mother’s words. I flush it away and dab more foundation on the fresh skin underneath, so my ear will match the rest of me.

#

I inherited the molting, which my mother will deny; she’ll insist it’s a thing only women do, each heartbreak withering on the body and falling like a petal.

I first saw her do it after her mother stilled in her hospital bed. On the ride home, my Mémère’s final kiss dry on her cheek, a cast of her face unhinged at the chin and floated down into her palms, concave and translucent. The trait loops through our family’s ladies back and back like a braid through beads, since before they left Haiti as refugees. The first pain to peel me apart came later, when she forged “Love, Dad” into cards he didn’t send, that first Christmas after he cheated and left. The bracelet he gave me at birth started chafing on my wrist, and when my mother undid the clasp my sorrow slipped from that arm like an elbow-length glove, dainty and fine.

Her alarm was quickly disguised. She tried to play it off like I was allergic to nickel and never discussed it again, but Juneau still wears his, and I know it’s made of gold.

Juneau never molted, which confused me back then, but after learning what I was it wasn’t hard to imagine that if our family had borne other men like me, they’d have been molted as heartbreaks
just the same. One day little Fabienne will molt, too. She’ll learn repression like the rest if my mother has her way. The baby will realize quickly that even moons answer to gravity, and we are all my mother’s satellites.

#

It’s five hours down from Orlando to Kendall. South Florida laps caustic against my body when I step out of the car, eyes level with the small stick-figure family affixed to my brother’s back window. I’m glad he’s here. I won’t have to be alone with her. Her house, like her, is too much for no reason, an empty big-top for a single performer. Her high windows end in arches. Her mulch is fresh and bright. She stands a head shorter than I, carefully slim and lotion-sheened with her head wrapped in the absence of a wig. We have those in common. At the threshold she leans for a kiss and says, “I’m glad you could be here, cheri. They’ll be so happy to see you.”

I realize how likely it is that my father’s already in town, that he may have caught a ride with Juneau and the others. Her face changes when she sees the dread on mine.

“Is he here?” I ask.

“Oh,” she says in her throat, a deep Haitian sound meaning don’t be like that. “Where else would he be?”

The clockwork of her house stutters as I slot back into it. The walls are more crowded now, barnacled with the usual photos—of me and Juneau, our cousins and uncles, our mother, our mother, our mother—as well as snapshots from the first almost-year of Fabienne’s life. A pregnant Vanessa at a shower I skipped. A hospital room, a baptism. I tug my shirt low, self-conscious in front of so many faces that don’t know what it is to see me through smoke and light, or brush money across Luz Divinity’s bare navel. All my bolder selves wait in a wardrobe far away. We pass a TV where a preacher sweats the Holy Spirit like a toxin, and when the dining table comes into view it’s clear we’ve been
carefully arranged. Facing me, Juneau and Vanessa make up my mother’s right hand; at the other end, Fabienne in a high chair. At my mother’s left there’s just one empty seat—between her and my father, who sits with his back to me. I wonder if God finds as much joy in poising asteroids to collide.

Juneau sees me first, shouting, “Look who it is!”

Vanessa pauses to look in the middle of feeding Fabienne, who strains toward the spoon with her mouth wide open. My father's greying hair is gelled into threads that taper like contrails across the globe of his skull. I give him a quick hello he might hear or doesn’t. My mother sets a sweaty, microwaved plate in front of me, and I decide I’m going to make it through this dry Boston Market rotisserie without looking at him once. He speaks when she prompts him to—“Gaston, what were you just telling us about your neighbor’s dog?”—but interacting with us is as alien a reflex to him as walking in heels, or keeping a promise. My brother listens, rapt, our mother’s influence clear, and Vanessa—Vanessa who comments on my live streams when I try out new cosmetics, and sends me memes from RuPaul’s Drag Race—Vanessa looks at me like with practiced patience, letting me know I’m seen. “Nou lèd, nou la,” goes the old Haitian phrase. We’re ugly, but we’re here.

I’m short with my mother’s small talk. So many things we aren’t bringing up, and we all know what they are, just like we all knew the mistress’s name, and when they married, and when she died, without a word said aloud in this house. She rubs her wrists like they pain her, but her smile never breaks.

#

Juneau leads me down pressure-washed sidewalks after lunch to “digest” in the blazing heat. He’s in a polo and cruise shorts. His cologne smells expensive, getting stronger as he sweats. He apologizes again for the short notice, but not the change of plans; he asks about my shows, then corrects himself: “Sorry. Gigs.” I join my thumb and pointer and make a face like Nailed it.
“You should come see me sometime,” I tell him. “I could get you in.” He’s quiet too long, so I voice his thoughts. “Yeah. The baby.”

The excuse has a hell of a shelf life. A heat rash prickles on my forearms, the backs of my knees.

“Maybe if Dad keeps helping out,” Juneau says. “You wouldn’t believe how he’s shown up since she was born. He’s over, like, every weekend. He wants her to call him Grandpapá.”

“It’s cute.”

“He’s thinking of moving closer.”

I check my words like produce. Each one has a bruise, so I put them all back.

“He doesn’t need all that space since Mathilde passed away, and I think being around Fabi has really helped him. I feel like he’s starting fresh, you know?”

It shouldn’t be this painful—diverging, having lives. As boys we’d never needed separate ones, not until I started high school and left him a grade behind, on a different campus; the year I met Rodney, who let me share one of his headphones on the bus rides home. That was the year M.I.A. put gunshots on the radio, the crank of cash registers, the word murder. Luz Divinity used to perform to that song around Orlando, until the real shots rang out this past June and she retired it. The sharing led to leaning, that to touching: bare arms, pinkies straining to meet across the green vinyl bench. I walked these same perfect sidewalks with Rodney when a cold snap stunned the iguanas out of the trees, heavy and petrified around our stop, and he enlisted me to rescue the ones that had tumbled past the gutters.

“We gotta get these things off the road,” he’d said, claiming to have seen one burst under a tire with his own eyes.

He cupped the nearest lizard’s belly with one hand and waddled into the grass with his arms
straight out. He lowered it slow. I copied him all the way up the street, away from our houses, until we reached a small park with a playground. We shared our first kisses in the deserted public restroom. His lips touched my face, my eyelids, my neck, and when at last he reached for me with one cold hand, he paused.

“You’re cut,” he said.

_Cut?_ There was no pain; was I bleeding?

Rodney pulled his hand from my waistband and lowered his own, zipper blooming open. His was unlike my own, unlike my brother’s. When I touched it, the sensation was _foreign_.

“Godly men are cut,” my mother explained when I figured out how to ask without details, citing diagrams and textbook pages. “Otherwise you’re dirty, and He despises filth.”

That night, my skin began lifting away at every place Rodney’s lips had touched, hot with shame over a thing done in the dark on floors tacky with urine. Filth after all. Juneau watched upside-down from his bunk as I crumpled up the translucent heartbreak that fell from my face, a petal just like our mother’s. I wanted to tell him what happened, why it hurt, who I was, really, now that he didn’t live his life parallel to mine anymore. It would’ve been the first time I’d had to catch him up on anything. I wanted to know how he’d feel if I told him about the first bits of us our mother ever claimed and then discarded. I never asked.

“I miss the iguanas,” I say aloud. I can still feel their skin, bumpy and tight over nothing but muscle.

“I don’t know,” Juneau replies. “I heard they’re invasive.”

I scratch at the inside of my elbow. A crescent of sweat and lotion and grime gathers under my fingernail and I flick it away. We take the narrow sidewalk home, performing proximity, careening apart.
We cool off until dinner, scattered. Juneau sits with our father on the sofa the old man picked out before cheating. The TV airs a block of televangelists—Meyer, Osteen, Jakes. Fabienne is asleep in the bedroom directly over their head, cushioned like an idol and surveilled by my mother’s faceless foam wig heads. In the kitchen my mother lays chicken thighs into an oiled caldero with a sound like applause, searing them for an elaborate paella, and when Vanessa comes down from settling Fabienne I take the shrimp duty my mother tries to place on her. Peel and devein. The act of flaying comes naturally to my hand.

Vanessa sits nearby at the kitchen bar-top, flapping her shirt to generate wind. A flush hugs her under-eyes. She is blue-eyed and fair, white-passing if not for the Miami on her voice. One dinner, when Juneau was still courting, I found out Vanessa was hiding a shrimp allergy to make our mother happy. “How long you gonna tell that lie?” I asked her then.

“I got Benadryl,” she’d said. “If it was worse I would say something. Or move to a different city like some people.” She winked. I stuck out my tongue. Tonight, I’m sure, she’ll take a pill before eating. The concession hurt to see, when in the early days she arrived as someone I could look at and know I wasn’t crazy. She’s still that, thank God, but she’s done her assimilating. Now Vanessa may as well come clean about her allergy. My mother would praise her and nothing would change. A woman who accommodates; that’s this family’s way.

My mother measures out scoops of dry yellow rice and fills the caldero with stock. She asks for the shrimp just as I set the last one down, but when I carry the bowl to the stove she frowns.

“You took off the tails?” she says. “The tails add flavor.”

“Aren’t they easier to eat this way?” I say, but she shakes her head.

“Just put them in. Here,” she says, lifting the pot lid, and when she stands back to make room
for me, the hot water gathered on the lid runs and spills across her bare arm, scalding her. She screams. The lid drops to the counter, spinning on its knoblike handle as she hurries to the sink to run her arm under cool water. It’s so unlike her, this mistake—she’s heavier in space like this, distressed, and everyone in the house rolls toward the heightened gravity of my mother in pain, wondering what happened.

She turns to dry herself and catches me gawking, pausing her refrain of “It’s nothing, it’s alright” to say “What are you doing? Put those in!” I realize I’m still holding the bowl of shrimp half-tipped over the pot.

As we eat, I see toothpaste smeared over the burn. When the shrimp turn up in the rice, swollen and tender, I find them hard to swallow.

#

That night the shower is startling white, a camera flash. My own darkness is bold against it. Juneau and I shared this tub as boys, plastering hair from our combs to the walls to keep it out of the drain.

Across the landing from the bathroom my mother’s room is sealed, double doors with ornate handles that curl away from each other like the halves of a mustache. I once watched through a crack as she applied lotion to her long, smooth legs—a floral cream with glitter in it, one she usually wore to the beach. I coveted it. My own lotions were thick, medicated and scentless, extra-strength and boring. My mother’s glitter lotion spread smooth and cool onto my own legs, and when she caught its sparkle on me in the daylight the beating made that heartbreak slip from both my legs like hose, see-through and delicate. It was the last time I entered her room. I wonder if she still uses that brand. I place one foot toward those doors and hear her footsteps approach.

I leap back into the bathroom and flip the light back on so I can flip it off again and walk out
as she appears on the steps. I try to look as though I hadn’t just been considering what I’d been considering.

My mother smiles, the stairs crackling beneath her like ice in warm water. She depresses one half of the golden mustache and says, “Breakfast early. No sleeping in.” I nod my goodnight. We retreat backwards into our rooms, little automatons in a cuckoo clock. In the morning we’ll pop out on our tracks and dance.

In the dark, my old room is unsure how to hold me, so used to containing a boy and then nothing at all. Slipping into these sheets as a man feels like pulling on used socks. She’s cleared out the old bunk, replaced it with an elliptical and a single twin bed. The sounds of shouted ministry tumble down the hall from her bedside radio. I think about sleeping, but the ceiling is too far away without my brother’s weight sagging in the absent top bunk, and years of drag have put my own clockwork behind. I border on nocturnal. I think back to the last night’s final fog-machined minutes and miss them already—the wig, the cover of night, the jewels in my eyes. Here I am bald and shrunken, a burrowing thing blinking in the sun.

What I wish for is company; that I could be in my brother’s apartment, occupying the spaces my father stole from me, or else that Juneau were here, now, so I could run off with his child while he sleeps, the child he is about to raise like us.

I check my hookup apps, put them away, open them again. I shuffle skin like playing cards. There’s a face I keep returning to, have returned to every time my orbit grazes home throughout the years. The face is fuller now, the jaw more sure; a bar piercing bisects one eyebrow, half-hidden by hair styled into twists he didn’t have before. But there’s enough there, beneath the layers of age, and his profile puts him at just the right age. I send the man a message:

*What are you listening to these days?*
Slats of moonlight rove across my lap as I wait. The linens smell of storage. I open the closet for an extra blanket and find the pair of towels Juneau and I used in our bathtub days, the baby kind with hoods.

I’ve accepted silence as rejection by the time the snoring begins. My mother’s breath fills the house with a honest kind of ugliness, a truth in the ragged pull of her sinuses. The unconscious body doesn’t lie. I’m comforted by it, can even imagine falling asleep to it despite the itch of the bedsheets under my shoulder blades, but a message has just buzzed under my pillow.

I squint at the screen, mole-like again, cupping a star in the dark.

*Spare headphone for you,* he’s written. *Come find out.*

I’m out the door before I know it. I drive to the pinned address. A phantom trail of stunned iguanas guides my way forward through the night.

#

When I arrive Rodney does the expected thing. He says how long it’s been. He wonders why I’m back.

“*A baby?*” He breathes a long *phee*, says we’re old. “*Good for him. How’s the scene in Orlando?*”

I think of Luz Divinity, striding around the downtown in heels that put her six inches higher than me at all times. Her hair catching wind, her lashes glued on, her hips padded with foam cutlets that fill her out every time she mounts a stage. It feels like a betrayal to speak of her here, to a neighborhood that doesn’t want her. When I answer, it’s muffled through my mother’s palm. “*It’s hard to say. I’m not really part of it.*”

He smiles weirdly. “*Okay, well, you’re totally lying. I’ve seen you perform.*”

I sit up straight. We’re in his bedroom, dark save a blue neon sign of an astronaut. “*You have?*”
“I visit some buddies there sometimes,” he says. “I was pretty sure I saw you dancing to ‘Paper Planes’ from the sidewalk last summer, but then I saw you again in October and knew it for sure. On that parade float.”

I’m not prepared to remember this—that particular Pride, the vigil, the names read aloud, the forty-nine lanterns loosed over Lake Eola in the heart of downtown. I’m not prepared to remember how Juneau and Vanessa blew up my phone the night it happened, wondering where I was, while my mother never offered me a word of condolence past “See? How this thing that you do is so dangerous?” I’m not prepared for any of it, so I make a joke that doesn’t land. “Did you tip?”

“The last time I touched you, we never spoke again.”

“That was my mom.”

“Is it different now? There’s no one here but us.”

The astronaut drifts, and I join it. I wonder if that’s true. More than her hand over my mouth, I feel her face behind my skin, her bones beneath my muscles. Like it or not, I’ve learned more than I thought about lying as preservation.

Memories curve before me like space across a visor, scenes from a service on marriage that left me itchy and raw, my arms raked with white ash that I had to beat from my trousers and the seat around me. After, in traffic, Juneau listened to music in the backseat while I twitched in the passenger. “I hope you listened today,” she said. “I talked to Pastor about you. He told me we must pray.” When we made it home she sent Juneau inside and led me in the sign of the cross. My right hand cycled again and again to my face, heart, shoulders, and with each plea for my purity the heartbeat loosened and loosened and detached, a long, empty glove. She threw it out the window. It flailed down the street. I hid myself better after that. Just until I could leave.

I look at Rodney and see my face reflected twice, dim blue Neptunes in the night of his eyes.
I lean forward in answer to his question and feel my mother pass through the back of me. We are a moment of impact, comet and crater. When he lays me back his sheets are cool and smell like him, and when I draw him into me it’s like I’m a creature with suddenly twice as much flesh. This time, when he kisses me, it’s as though he smooths down the parts that would otherwise lift away, sealing me up.

He bites my earlobe. “Louis,” he says, pronouncing the s, and it almost sounds like Luz.

#

The morning of the party I overcompensate, awake so early that dawn is not light but color. Red hovers low like a heavy gas. Shaking off odd dreams—iguanas eating their own molts—I sneak my makeup into the bathroom.

I find her at the kitchen sink, lit dimly by the light of the vent hood over the stove. The wig she’s selected today is a sleek bob, parted down the middle, and she’s lifting a mug from the drying rack as I approach. Coffee growls into a glass carafe. I watch her notice my face: the yolk-colored shadow I’ve matched to my shirt, the highlight spread delicately atop my cheekbones. She arranges her face the way some people balance rocks. “Eat something quick and come around back,” she says. “I’m cleaning the pool.”

A vacuum wanders the floor of her very leafy pool, dragging its ribbed tubing along the surface of the water. I lift a long-handled net from a hook while she beats leaves and seed casings from the hard cushions of her patio furniture. The debris clatters to her feet. The smell of chlorine wafts up as I disturb the water’s surface. I can tell I’ve unsettled her because she’s absolutely silent. She was always happiest in the sun with us. Juneau and I spent whole summers in this pool, cupping bees out of the filter currents and evacuating our lungs to sink like stones, our skin toasting and deepening while our mother sang worship through her grill-scraping, her hedge-trimming. I know she looks at the water
now and imagines me as she made me, the prayer-peeled boy she’d sworn she sent to college with the Spirit in his heart, until he began posting photos as Luz. I wish I could offer her that version of me now—a husk of uninhabited flesh, the full-body heartbreak I shed at eighteen, for her to display on a wall or across the back of her sofa, the mouth of my pelt wide and dark.

My mother and I sweep pavers and straighten tiki torches until the front doorbell chimes through a speaker box by the bar.

I move toward the house but she holds up a hand. “Let me get it. Just go wash that off, yes?”

She shuts the sliding door behind her. My reflection wobbles in the glass.

#

Rose gold balloons shaped like number ones gather on the ceiling and streamers climb the pillars in the sitting room, curtaining the sliding glass doors to the pool. There’s metallic confetti on the long dining table where the finger foods wait under cling-wrap. A wide space stays open for the cake. Guests pour in steadily—sunsoaked Kendall beauties from Juneau’s college years and weary pairs of parents and their babies from Vanessa’s mommy-and-me roster; a gaggle of my mother’s bible study ladies introducing each other as deaconess, prophetess, shepherdess, their titles flashing like grilles in their mouths. The kids and cousins run about in water-wings with sunscreen noses.

My mother asks me to pick up the cake, most likely to remove me from view. When I find my car boxed in, Juneau tosses me his keys and says, “Why don’t you take Pop?”

The maneuver is obvious, intentional. She moves beneath his features like a roach under a rug.

Our father is already standing and half the party’s in earshot. I can’t refuse without a scene. He follows me to the door.

The flat palm of the sun is hot on my thighs on the way to the bakery. The heat here has weight. My father’s guayabera and khaki pants blend with the upholstery. Beside his, my outfit is
loud—short trunks and bright linen. Mathilde was like him the few times I saw her, plain, unadorned. She was someone the aunties would look at and say, “He left you for that? Hub,” and my mother would say “Now…” in amused alarm, but her face would betray her agreement. She found Mathilde homely, Mathilde who slept late and wore no makeup and hardly kept her house, and if I know my mother there could be nothing more galling than being usurped by someone so low-effort. And suddenly, their differences so front of mind, my father looks so small, so nonthreatening. I don’t see a homewrecker or a deadbeat, a man who leaves his family chasing tail. I see a man who has grieved, still wearing his second wedding ring, still paying for the life that better suited him. I see a man my mother has lied about to preserve her curated reality, and it’s such a cliché I’m actually embarrassed when I realize: she’s mounted a pelt of him, too. We are the same.

The silence between us is fraught. We’re like tuning forks, suspensefully unstruck. We make it nearly all the way to the bakery before I say something I think I’d want to hear, if I were him. “I’m sorry about Mathilde. I wish I’d gotten to know her better.”

He turns. “You do?”

Challenged, I take a moment to see if I mean it, and I do. “Juneau said you’ve been spending a lot of time with them. With the baby. It sounded like that might be because of what happened.”

Brow furrowed, he stares at the dash. I worry I’ve misstepped. He doesn’t speak as I park, and inside the bakery we wait at a glass display filled with guava pastelitos, ham croquettes, finger sandwiches layered with a pink paste. It’s too cold in here to be wearing so little. The mermaid on Fabienne’s cake is lumpy when it comes to the front, her Rice Krispies arms and luster-dust scales looking sweaty, and the name is misspelled Fabiana. We ask for the name at least to be fixed. The attendant snaps her gum at us and takes it back.

“It’s not just because of Mathilde,” my father says at last. “I’m a better grandpa than dad.”
“Grandpapá,” I remember. “Juneau called it a fresh start.”

My father laughs, eyes closed, head shaking. “He’s very sentimental.”

“A miracle, considering,” I say through the side of my mouth—like I would to Vanessa, I realize, because my father’s just said something she would’ve said, and it’s startling to speak so candidly.

“Edwidge feels, she just hides. Her mom was hard too. Your mom stepped out of her whole skin the morning we left Haiti, and Mémère didn’t shed a tear. Not through the whole coup or anything after.” He considers this. “Not anywhere we could see, anyway.”

Bells clang as a customer enters and exits with a gummy-looking racecar cake. I wonder what secret molting she’s done, over her country, or her marriage, or me, or the perceived “dangers” of existing as I do when she’s worked so hard to assimilate. For everything she’ll never ask me are the things I’ve never asked her, our alien griefs and histories, the orbits that won’t cross. Against my will, I get it. I don’t know if we will change.

The mermaid cake returns, touched up. I hold doors for my father and help him ease down into the passenger seat, bearing the cake while he buckles in. I crank the A/C to preserve the frosting.

I take it slow on the way out of the plaza, both for the cake and the iguanas sunning on the cracked asphalt. He holds the cake out steady like it’s Fabienne herself, like both their lives depend on it. In the driveway I lower my visor and check my face, blotting sweat with fast food napkins and apologizing for the delay as I refresh the balm on my lips. He’s pinned down by the cake, unhurried. He says, “You look nice.”

#

As we gather to sing, my mother hands me her camera so I won’t be in the pictures. The first one I take is a selfie with everyone behind me. We hack up the mermaid and chew her fondant fins.

Outside, Juneau bounces Fabienne by the pool, who cried at the cheers and applause. She
cranes unsteadily sunward in his arms like a plant, her head a bulb on a stem.

I take her from his arms and insist he eat cake before it’s gone. At the edge of the pool with Fabienne on my knee, water lapping my calves. Her hair smells of chlorine, baby oil, the inside of a hat. I lay the length of my nose against her head and speak into her ear about the water, the leaves that fall in and why. I tell her about the anoles and their wild red throats. I ask her if she likes her party. I tell her what shade I have caked on my eyelids, and that one day Luz Divinity will have more wigs than Grandma, and she’ll have to come north and meet her drag auntie. I tell her how easy it is, in this place, to be scorched. She grasps my forefinger with her perfect little hand. Her skin is impossibly new, her arms fat, squeezable rolls of smooth brown. I direct a prayer at no one at all that her first heartbreaks molt off of her easily, and not for a very long time.

I feel her bottom warm against my arm and carry her inside for a change. “Her things are in Mom’s room,” Juneau says around his cake. “I can send Vanessa.”

Behind him, Vanessa makes a face, so I say, “I’ve got it.”

Past the golden mustache handles, the boudoir is empty. Sounds of the party seep up through the floor. I fumble the change a bit, shielding my trial-and-error from the gazes of the foam heads lined up on the dresser at my back. Fabienne is blessedly patient with me, staring blanky at the pink walls, the eighties-chic watercolor abstracts, the bowls full of shells next to bowls full of jewelry next to bowls filled with fragrant potpourri. Used diaper in hand, bundled tight, I toe the lever on the tall bin in my mother’s private restroom and pause. Spirals of empty, crumpled arms and fingers and faces, hollow and sheer as wrapping tissue. The topmost limb is smeared with dry toothpaste where it would have been scalded last night. The shed skins inside could be my mother two or three times over. I let the slam-proof lid lower slowly over her heartbreaks and lift Fabienne from the bed.

I spot my mother alone when I drop the diaper into the kitchen trash. She’s different here,
believing herself unobserved. For once she’s not performing. She recovers at the sight of the baby, reaching out with fresh arms free of burns, but for a second she looks so exhausted.
APOSTATES

Somewhere between the fourth smashed armadillo and the ninth Jesus billboard, Mami called to remind me to buy her nuts.

“Don’t forget my pecans,” she said. “The glazed kind, not the seasoned ones. And I’ll know if they come from a chain store.”

I was minutes from the Florida border, on a return trip from a concert in Atlanta. I was covering the performance for a summer class in radio journalism. I left Orlando two mornings before with a suitcase, planning to bypass my college town heading south and drive straight to Broward County, where July Fourth with Mami’s church was only days away. She was making sure I didn’t show up empty-handed.

Already I’d seen at least half a dozen exit signs for candied pecans, $5.99 a pound. Once I crossed out of Georgia they’d all be about citrus. And fireworks. I debated telling her I’d forgotten and missed my chance; that I’d be happy to bring her some nice warm oranges from a stand in our home state, further south where people looked like me; that I preferred not to suffer nut-induced anaphylaxis that far from home, or hate crimes, and anyway I had the sphinx to worry about, trailing in the air behind my car like a brown, cruciform kite. But I knew what Mami would say.

You don’t have to eat them to buy them. I think it’s a simple enough request.

And if I were to say, No, it’s just that I was the darkest thing out of uniform at the Buc-ee’s a few miles back and my double-Venus bumper sticker needs to move at a certain speed or I’ll start to shake, she’d hit me with the Why do you always have to make things so dramatic? You can spend a night alone in Atlanta but you’re telling me the nut stand is too dangerous? That’ll teach me to ask you for anything.

Except I wasn’t alone in Atlanta, though she couldn’t know about the internet girl I met with
at the venue.

And all of this without acknowledging the sphinx, which Mami would call *it* even though Xiomara had been with me since I came out in high school.

So I did the easier thing and said, “I didn’t forget,” and banked hard to catch the next exit.

#

Several of us got creatures as we began to find ourselves, but Xiomara was the most admired. She appeared the day I realized my feelings for Josie Guerrera. My heart sank one morning when Josie wasn’t on the bus after a school year of sharing a seat and exchanging gazes neither of us knew what to do with, and it wasn’t long before everyone on the bus was oohing at the beast soaring level with our windows. Xiomara had a panther’s tan body, the Florida kind, and the shaggy brown-gray wingspan of a sandhill crane, porcelain white underneath and proportional to her body. Her face was serene and heavy-lidded. She followed me the whole day, lounged in patches of sunlight during my classes, and flew home after me that evening.

Word got to Josie, and she withdrew. She must have gotten something small of her own, though, because her backpack sometimes stirred unattended, and she became known for angrily shushing whatever lived inside.

Down in Cooper City, at the curved bridge of Florida’s turtle nose, I learned to wield Xiomara’s company like proof of something. Like destiny. One look at her rippling muscles and unbothered confidence and everyone knew I’d be leaving. I had dreams—radio-television; a career in broadcasting; curated streaming, a hosting block, concert coverage; a life waist-deep in all the music that lay beyond Mami’s dial, always tuned to Christian stations. The program that accepted me would put me on the air within a short couple of years, and when the time came to pack and move north across the length of the state, my belongings crowded against the seatbacks, Xiomara was right behind.
That was a victory on its own; even the fiercer ones didn’t always make it out. There were always cases like Ale Ortega, who put down his manticore and became a youth pastor.

Mami wasn’t cruel on purpose. You know I love you, she liked to say, but I don’t see what it has to do with that. I left Cooper City jealous of all the kids whose parents held their children’s creatures in family photos, who stroked them or wrestled with them or built shelters in their yards.

I tried to be grateful; it could always be worse. But that comfort didn’t keep.

#

The nut stand wasn’t a stand but a store, built like a plantation house with a wraparound porch that gleamed white in the early July sun. Patriotic bunting hung under the windows, and a fake Christmas wreath covered in rusted metal stars hung on the triangular wood that crowned the front door. Mami swore she’d brought me here before, on the way back from the Georgia Aquarium, but I must have been a toddler or younger. I had no memory of it. If it was true, though, it must not have taken long to find out about my allergy.

Around me stood a deep, endless pecan orchard, green and orderly. The trees sighed against each other, lined with enough allergens to kill every past and future incarnation of me in every possible universe.

I stood next to the car as Xiomara landed on the roof. The chassis sank over the tires like sleepy eyelids beneath her weight. She folded her paws under herself and rested her chin on her bent wrists, tail swishing against the back window. Her long, golden forearm was hot to the touch from all that sunshine. I wanted her to go in with me; that way, at least when people noticed at the tank I was wearing without a bra, or the piercings that showed through it, I could pretend they were noticing Lady Pantherbird instead of me. What would the vibe be inside? Would it be that gas station all over again?
Mami wouldn’t have thought about it. Down south, she didn’t have to.

Your class looks like a Coke ad, she said once, fanning herself with a program at one of my debates. When she was growing up, my school was nothing but white Jews.

That past of hers made her walk with her chest. Belonging was a thing she put on before stepping out of the house; for me, it was something I had to hope I would find any time I went anywhere new. Had it made me weak, growing up so comfortable?

The grassy lot was people-free as I approached the door, though there were a few other cars, watched only by a handful of disused tree-shakers that loomed in the orchard like steer. One black truck sported a mounted yellow flag, limp in its stillness, but I could just make out the head of a snake peering through the folds. Next to the door, taking up space on the scuffed porch, was a tall wooden cutout of a family—mommy, daddy, a little son with a ball cap, a baby girl with a bow—the heads of which were all brown pecans with round faceholes in their centers. I imagined white children peering out of those holes, and promptly stopped imagining it.

A bell jingled when the door knocked against it, and I stood looking out on echoey hardwood floors dotted with pecan displays. Each was a pyramid of a different kind or flavor.


“Welcome in,” an older woman called from the register. “Feel free to open any of the little sample baggies.”

She had a jolly face and a turkey neck. Her shirt was as pink as her cheeks. The top of a young blonde head showed from under the counter, the kid’s eyes still low out of sight from that distance. Some of the other customers walked around grazing from bags of nuts as they browsed, open in their palms, and I made a mantra of touching only through the protection of a wet wipe, which I hoarded in my leather crossbody.
I pulled one out and used it to lift a large plastic container from the pyramid marked honey-glazed. The sides of the container wobbled like sheet metal in my grip, a goofy approximation of thunder.

“Just these today?” the lady asked at checkout.

I nodded, and she rang them up. Behind her head was a sign of reclaimed wood painted with Psalm 34:8—Taste and see that THE LORD is good. The kid was a little girl, I could see now. Maybe ten. Her lips were smeared with the seasoned dust from the dill pickle pecans she plucked from her sample bag, and her hazel eyes were making unbroken contact with the studs in my tits. I punched in my PIN with a wet-wipe covered finger and tried not to notice. The older woman kept making conversation.

“Where are we visiting from?”

“Orlando. I’m a student there.”

She looked down. “Hear that, missy? This here’s a friend of Mickey Mouse.”

I grabbed the nuts, the receipt, and said, “I’ll tell him you said hi.” I couldn’t tell if the missy had a capital M, but I decided, why shouldn't it? Missy met my eye for just a second before the woman wished me a blessed day and I walked back into the heat.

#

Her name was Sage, the internet girl I met in Atlanta. We got to chatting some months before I learned I could attend a show and draft a report on it for credit, and when I asked if she knew of any incoming acts she admitted to liking an emerging someone called Io—an experimental solo act who danced and sang by herself in a toga.

She took her name from one of Jupiter’s moons, Sage explained. It’s the most volcanic body in our solar system.
Sage found my program fascinating. Her back heel barely closet-clear, she and her quiet life leaned in for every detail of my loud one: the morning show I deejayed on the school’s own public station, the local acts I’d interviewed, the podcast I’d found too difficult to maintain but hadn’t given up on. She even managed to spelunk into my summers in the church A/V rotation, pivoting the camera that swept across the same stage each Sunday to keep Pastor in frame for the satellite campuses tuning in across the peninsula. Mami had secured that job for me, misunderstanding my gifts. If this is your talent, she said, give it to God. The following year she aimed a bit closer, got me a position on the church’s own FM station—this was a massive church, with a school attached and a football team—and I did that until college threw me a line. When my concert reporting assignment prompted me to travel, Sage was adamant I come to her. I couldn’t resist.

We arranged to meet hours before showtime. I parked in a tall, crowded garage, and when I looked back at the building from down the street, where Xiomara rejoined me, it was swarming with obscure winged things and colorful serpents and even a maned chimera that roared bursts of flame. Knowing this was a place like my college town brought me comfort, safe for and adapted to people like me. Like so many things, Mami wouldn’t understand what it was to have to check whether a city could hold your weight, what it felt like to find another foothold when all the rest was rapids. Mami jumped without looking, figuring if any of those rocks turned out to be a gator’s face, she’d simply drown the thing and carry on. I couldn’t pretend I didn’t admire that about her.

I found Sage sitting on the sidewalk like all the other concert-goers waiting in the heat, cross-legged and speaking softly to the teardrop of pink flame in her hand. It blew out when it saw me and reconstituted over her shoulder, peering shyly at me with wide white eyes. Sage turned to face me and stood. Her hair was up in a wrap. She wore a long skirt and a simple crop, her midriff dark and smooth, and her nails flashed glossy when she reached up to adjust a black satin choker, carefully concealing
her Adam’s apple.

We talked a while as the streets darkened. A picketer came and left, upset by Io’s fame, his sign plastered with the Lord’s red letters. He was booed away. The line hugged a gravel lot where Xiomara lay slumbering. The pink wisp floofed closer and closer to her from Sage’s side until we all stood, and in the end the sphinx took off as we inched into the venue.

Io’s concert was bizarre.

She entered to theremin sounds and descended into interpretive dance. Her bare feet slapped the stage with each jete through the air.

I enjoyed the show in my technical way, archiving details for the report I would write, but nowhere near as much as Sage, who knew all the words and seemed to feel them, pointing and punching the air and contorting her face. I meant to look her up before I came, I told Sage, but I’ve never heard these songs before. She said, That’s okay. And later, when we sat still on my hotel bed so long that the motion-activated lights dimmed, she said, I’ve never, I’ve never, and I repeated, That’s okay. The wisp flashed and guttered around the room as we undressed and drew together, at times trusting me with all I couldn’t otherwise see, at others choosing to hide, or was it Sage hiding? I decided I didn’t care. We’d all needed to at some point.

#

Xiomara was right where I left her outside the nut shop. Her human mouth yawned, and a deep animal grumble rolled from her throat.

I was barely a yard past the lip of the wraparound porch when I noticed that the black truck cruising in slow from my left had sped up at the sight of me. It blared its horn and I jumped back, losing my footing and crashing into the dust. My head missed the stoop’s bottom step. The nut box popped open, squeezed too tight in my grip. Pecans scattered across my smarting body.
The truck roared off, a yellow Gadsden flag whipping behind it. The snake seemed to move.

Part of me wondered what the driver looked like—had we been inside at the same time? But a louder part was petrified in the dirt, keenly aware of the tree nuts now touching its body. I stood stiffly, so they’d fall on their own, but a few clung to my hair, my denim shorts. I batted them off with the same wipe I used to give my PIN at the register.

I glanced at the open case of honey-glazed pecans on the ground. Maybe half remained.

I decided half would be enough for Mami. Before I could stoop to close the container, though, the shadow of Xiomara’s wingspan spread dark across the ground, and her buffeting coated the contents with dust. The sphinx curled defensively around me, hackles raised, her amber cat eyes darting and laser-focusing on the front door of the nut shop when it tinkled open. Missy hurried out and stillled as the door shut against her back.

“Down, girl,” I said. “It’s fine now.” My back hurt. And was that an itch?

“Are you okay?” Missy looked expectantly at me. “Granny’s working the till. I’m supposed to check.”

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

“I never seen one before.” She chanced a look at Xiomara.

I saw myself in Missy then; not my style or affections, my color or my baggage, but the way she seemed as temporary there as I felt in Cooper City—how at that age, raised against exactly one stale, stationary backdrop, there was no end to the sentences we could start with “I never.” I wondered if she meant a sphinx, or a past-earthly beast of any kind. One made me far sadder than the other. I couldn’t think what else to say except, Well, now you have, which felt mean, so I was quiet until she noticed the dust-covered pecans on the ground and told me to hang on. She emerged a moment later with a fresh box, which she placed in my hands. “Granny says to take these. She’s sorry what
happened.”

“Tell her that’s very, very nice.”

I wanted to say more, but “Hang in there” presumed too much, and “Really, I’d like to give my mom the ones covered in dirt for making me come here” was too much to unload on the girl. So I swept off my thighs one last time and told Xiomara to lead the way. I decided then that I’d call Sage on the way home and tell her all the things I’d grow too small or tired to say to Mami on the road south, because for all my life’s loudness and the moves she admired me for, Sage was the one whose parents roared away from her like that black pickup truck when she uttered her truths, and if anyone knew how to dust off a girl on her back it was her.

The sphinx took a running start and climbed into the sky like it was solid beneath her bounding paws, lifting dust high into the air. I’d catch up with her in a minute; she’d be hard to miss. I paused and lifted a hand at Missy, hugging her knees on the front step. But she wasn’t looking at me. She was watching Lady Pantherbird grip the clear day between her claws, as if memorizing footholds she could follow.
haunted three people after he left his body, concussed, snow covering his acne scars and the icy porch steps and the garbage bag that never made it to the bins. Amador was never haunted, but everyone knew someone. They took leave or missed a few days of school to do what they were asked. It was the kind of question you posed drunk on the hood of someone’s car, or quiet over a pillow: Who would you haunt? Why? Amador never knew how to answer, but when he died it seemed so clear. He had to find Joel. He burned with purpose all the way to Orlando, until he found his young cousin perched like a lighthouse on the slopes of a polluted lake. There and back, on the wing of Joel's plane as New Jersey smoldered beneath them, Amador began to realize he was doing what he’d always done, being what he’d always been: an intermediary, a bridge between worlds, in life for his immigrant family, and in death for his half-estranged cousin. Amador haunted three people but only appeared to Joel, for his mother and grandfather had him for so long, and if anyone needed an intercessor now it was the boy who knocked, with rings on his knuckles, on the door of a house he hadn’t entered since before his tattoos, before his first kiss, before he came out.

Amador could sense the house beyond the door, could flick between its frequencies and Joel’s as if with a dial. He listened as his mother, Nellie, approached to answer Joel’s knocking, the dog at her heels; and beyond, in a bedroom—

*tuned his ear to the bedside radio. Any day, any minute, there would be a new pope. A commentator spoke on the tradition of cardinals beseeching the saints for guidance on their way into the Sistine Chapel to choose. It is too holy and daunting a task, he said of the vote, for any of them to perform
on their own. What a thing—how like a haunting that suddenly seemed, a room full of old men and spirits. Under the broadcast, Segundo heard his daughter greet the boy, who answered the crisp bill of her Spanish with the loose change of his.

Nellie ushered him into Segundo’s room.

“Hola, Papito,” the boy said. Jaw sealed by Parkinson’s, Segundo said nothing.

His other daughter, Joel’s mother, had called ahead to explain the visit. Joel would arrive late one night and stay in the second-floor unit, which had belonged to Amador; in the morning he’d come down, air Segundo out for a while, stay another night, and leave. He’d do it in fulfillment of a haunting, accompanied by Amador’s ghost.

Was the ghost there now, behind them? Had it entered the room first? Segundo could not angle his wheelchair for a better look, and part of him felt that was best. What he could see was a poor replacement for Amador—weak posture, a little hunched, Joel’s body small in so many layers of clothing. March in Paterson was cold, Segundo could admit, pero no era pa tanto. It was colder the night Amador—the night of what happened. This Florida boy knew nothing of cold.

“We’ll leave you, then,” said Nelida in Spanish, offering her nephew the exit.

Joel raised his hand, barely. “Hasta mañana.”

The dog, which had huffed her annoyance while they blocked the door, trotted inside as they left, and sat once again at Segundo’s socked feet. The front door open and shut. He imagined his daughter and grandson in the stairwell that ran up one side of the house. Most of his neighbors rented their upper floors out to strangers, but Segundo never entertained the thought. The house was for his family, no matter how many of them moved away, and anyway there’d never be a better tenant than Amador, who Segundo missed all the more acutely as Joel and Nellie moved their weight across the ceiling, making the same thumps and creaks Amador used to make every morning and night, when he
was home. Segundo tried not to imagine them long; if he did, he’d imagine the ghost in their company, its feet hovering above the old hardwood.

The dog snored softly on the floor, herself a silly, ribboned replacement for the last shih-tzu, Bóbi, hit by a car. Segundo wondered if his family knew he could still tell the difference.

By ten the next morning Joel had wheeled him down Walnut Street, past the house of Doña Viola, the gossip who gave out el mal de ojo like candy, and across the Passaic River (bypassing the Great Falls, to Segundo’s dismay) on their way up into the dun-colored trails Garret Mountain Reservation. The shih-tzu, leashed to Joel’s wrist, plodded along in an absurd padded vest. The air was a comfortable forty or so, the sun veiled through a tablecloth of even white clouds, and in this pale light the old man saw his grandson clearly for the first time in years. His skin was clear, lips chapped; there was a line shaved out of one eyebrow. Black studs winked in his earlobes. His fingernails were unusually reflective. When he spoke, his Spanish was halting and unsure, like each word was a tooth he was alarmed to see fall from his mouth.

It was sad.

And yet Segundo was grateful to be out, though his face could not convey it. He hadn’t been further than the stoop since the burial, when the family gathered to place Amador in the Fair Lawn mausoleum. There was a row at the top of one wall into which he’d once watched his wife disappear. The second time, Segundo couldn’t crane his neck to look that high. The scissor lift raised Amador’s casket out of sight, then lowered empty as January winds leaned heavy on the doors.

In the summers, Amador had brought him out to the mountain, too, first on foot, then in the chair. Bóbi as well. Chipmunks and deer, little gray-brown rabbits, white couples with binoculars and telescoping cameras snapping photos of birds in the branches. People jogged or walked dogs or, in
the clearing ahead, tossed Frisbees, laid picnic blankets. Then this place was a medicine commercial, idyllic and engineered for hope. Now it was, perhaps, on this winter day with Joel, the first half of a medicine commercial at best: the part where old people massage their own shoulders and grimace in black and white, their pains diagrammed in red. Every so often Joel muttered to himself in English, and it dawned on Segundo that Amador was still there, unseen at Joel’s side, a commentator on a station Segundo couldn’t receive. That was the worst thought of all. What he’d give to see Amador leaning down to close the collar of his coat, or brush a fallen leaf from his blanketed lap, attentive as ever and wearing the same warmth on his face Segundo came to expect with the tea they shared, or their games of mancala, or the songs one would strum for the other. Today he felt like a chore.

Joel stopped them at the top of an incline, where the chair wouldn’t roll.

“Quise ir al—eh… al castillo,” he said. “El de Lambert Castle?”

Those last were English words, Segundo thought, and yet, bewilderingly, the boy had said them with an accent.

“No es lejos,” he continued, and then Joel noticed something on Segundo’s face, for he began to search his coat pockets. Segundo figured he was drooling. Common enough. Out of Joel’s pockets came a small notebook, several pens, tangled wires, like Amador used for music; a lump of something grey and dirty; a pad of yellow adhesive notes like the ones Nelida sometimes stuck on the fridge. Eventually he produced a wad of brown fast-food napkins. He paused, hand outstretched, clearly uncertain whether he should dab Segundo’s face. Segundo mustered another nod. There must have been a lot; Joel touched the rough paper all the way down under Segundo’s chin before he tucked the wad away.

Segundo watched the dog crest the hill before him as the three continued forward. He felt Joel’s stuttering gait as he gripped the chair’s handles against gravity, the path sloping down and away,
and when they got there the castle was closed. Segundo was glad. He preferred being outside. Amador took him in once, when he could walk, and they’d both been severely underwhelmed.

Lambert Castle was small, as castles go, and, Segundo thought, ugly. The inside, at least: pastel walls hung with odd artifacts, decorative spoons, scenes from the man Lambert’s home life recreated with his own furniture and belongings. He’d been a silk magnate some centuries past, a fixture of Paterson’s textile industry, and the ghosts of his trade still stood washed-out and defunct all across the city—factories long silenced, their bricks grayed and graffitied.

Joel seemed upset. He tied the dog to the wheelchair’s handle and left them under a skeletal cherry blossom tree while he read and reread the notice on the door. He paced, and slouched, and spoke to a spot in the air just above his eye level, his breath puffing all around his head.

The dog huffed as well, agitated. These two. Amador and Bóbi they were not.

Joel returned to the chair. “Sorry, Papito. It’s closed. Pero Amador dice—”

He stopped as if made to, but Segundo felt a gathering in his chest, all the strength within him wanting to reach forward and say, No, please, what did he say? What did my grandson say to you? His body would not obey.

“Say the word again, for waterfall?” Joel said to the air. He lowered his head, listening. “Vamos a las cataratas,” he said at last, in Segundo’s direction, and this was enough—evidence enough that Amador had been with them all morning, had remembered or intuited that Segundo loved the Great Falls and made sure to take him one last time. Segundo would cling to it.

The walk there was more populated. On the corner of Market and Mill, La Tía Delia burst with the frenzied hunger of the lunch crowd, generations of Peruvians all clamoring for a taste of the best in Paterson. It would do the boy good, Segundo thought, to see his people like this, whether he considered them his people or not—making the city theirs, building amid the mills and coughing
chimney stacks a center of culture that had even made news. If Segundo died right then, he thought, and rose from the wheelchair while his body remained, *that* would be his unfinished business. He’d haunt Joel just to say this and be on his way. He hoped Amador felt the same.

Within the hour, the wheelchair rattled onto the corroded metal bridge that spanned the roaring chasm of Paterson’s Great Falls. Joel gathered the dog into his arms, her fur lifting away from her eyes on the wind that blew out of the gorge. When he spoke, whether in English or Spanish, whether to her, or Segundo, or Amador’s ghost, Segundo could not make out the words and preferred it that way. The mist rising in columns around them was white as the sky, white as the smoke that would billow from the Sistine Chapel when a new pope was chosen, and Segundo wondered, distantly, whether the dead pope would be watching when he was replaced, and with that, Amador tuned the dial of his haunting to find—

*Nellie*

seated straight-backed in an armchair at her sister’s house, forty minutes from Paterson in the wooded mountains of Sparta. At her feet was a litter of puppies, blind and clumsy on their pile of blankets, and on the sofa opposite her sat Luisa, her hand tracing the snout of a boxer with long, hanging teats, fanned out on the cushion beside her. A second boxer watched Nellie over a baby gate in the kitchen doorway, his intensity making her sit even straighter.

“Walter can’t get through,” Luisa said. “He just sees that you’re in his chair.”

Nellie resisted the urge to pluck fur from the armrest. Paulina, the shih-tzu, was a neat little thing. Next to her Luisa’s boxers were beasts.

What a morning she’d endured already, her house empty of the children she usually cared for, their parents notified in advance of Nellie’s unavailability. They were understanding when she
mentioned the haunting, and for this much she was grateful, though she wondered on the drive up the mountain whether she should have received the children anyway for a bit of distraction. Having Joel had shaken her. She’d loved the boy as a child, leapt at any chance to watch her nephew while Luisa went to work—at one time, he and Amador may as well have been brothers—but the Joel that arrived with her son’s ghost beside was unrecognizable to her. What had happened to him in Florida? Who had he become? Nellie remembered, half guilty, half justified, how she had offered to keep Joel when Luisa moved south; who might he have become then? But that was an ancient argument, and Nellie knew better than to bring it up now, amid all her sister’s eccentricities.

“They’re out right now, then,” Luisa said. “At the castle, yes? Joel’s going to like that.” Nellie watched the puppies, wondering how that mattered. “Papi’s good for now?”

Nellie nodded. “He’s not due for his pills until later. Amador used to give them with dinner.”

Luisa ran the mother boxer’s ear between her fingers. “And how are you doing?”

How indeed? How to tell Luisa that she felt overlooked again? That she felt a perverse, shameful jealousy that her son’s spirit had passed her by on its otherworldly errand, just as their mother’s had some years ago? How to admit that Amador’s death was a free-bleeding amputation and that also, just as true, she resented that she was now Segundo’s caretaker, alone? How to articulate everything else she felt about Luisa’s breeze of a life, and still leave the mountain with a sister? What she finally said was, “I just don’t understand why he chose Joel.”

“Really?” Luisa said. “I always figured one of you would come for him, like Mami did with me. I thought it might even be you, honestly, when it was your time.”

“Me? Why?”

“Who else would your unfinished business be? You always thought you could do a better job with him.”
So she’d brought it up anyway. Reliably frank. That may have been true once, but Nellie wasn’t sure anymore. Joel seemed happy in the glimpses she caught of his life, photos with friends and the like. She’d seen his drawings shared to Facebook, his looping animations of people walking or animals fist-fighting, and found them charming. The boy was talented. But it was also true that it all felt aimless, or fruitless, in a way she couldn’t reconcile beside the daycare she ran off-the-books from her home, or the corner store that returned Amador to her weary each night. And the distance; that kind of lejanía would be harmful to anyone, from family, for one, and from God. “That doesn’t explain why he went after Joel,” Nellie said.

Luisa sucked her teeth, making the dog Walter’s eyes rove to her over the baby gate. “That’s how this family is, Nellie! Always trying to keep people close.”

“And that’s wrong?”

“I didn’t say that. I was happy to move back, to give Mami rest. But she wanted me to bring Joel, and I couldn’t do that to him. I was done raising him. He was starting his life.” Luisa gazed down at the puppies, tumbling over each other in their private darks. “Got to let them be. Right, mama?” she said to the boxer beside her, who gave a deep sigh.

But Nellie didn’t want to be let be. She wanted to receive a haunting and never carry it out, to know her departed was with her always. “I didn’t expect not to be needed.”

“That’s not such a bad thing.”

“Maybe not when you’re used to that,” Nellie said pointedly, “when you live far away and do what you want, but I saw those two every day. And when they could’ve said thank you, or goodbye, or I’ll miss you, they haunted other people instead.” Both sisters flinched at other people, but Luisa spoke before Nellie could walk back the insult.
“Being haunted wasn’t the joy you seem to think. When Mami came back there was nothing left of her but what she wanted from me, every day until I moved back, and me knowing the whole time she was only still with me because she thought I failed. Joel loved Amador, Nellie, but I’m sure he’s more than ready for this to be over and done w—”

“Please,” Nellie said, her chest caving. This she couldn’t bear. That her child might be reduced to such distilled want, such need, and that anyone might disdain it; it was familiar. The pups blurred on their blanket. Nellie thought of her mother, her father, all the needs she’d borne gladly for them, out of duty and with pride, and how these same needs cast a pall over her love for her sister, the one who got away. Was it Luisa’s fault for leaving, or theirs for needing? The answer seemed obvious, given all the ways Amador had shouldered her own needs, but there it was: in death he had not come to her, and Nellie was suddenly sure that if he had outlived her, she would have haunted him.

Allow me one last need, she thought, hoping her son would hear; just one, before you go. She needed him to know she was sorry.

Something clicked in the kitchen then, and both women looked to see the baby gate yawning open, the latch somehow disengaged. Walter lumbered droopily toward Nellie, toward “his chair,” and though Luisa gave commands for him to back away he only raised his wide front paws onto Nellie’s lap, staring. His warm, dark eyes were hammocked with pink. As Luisa rose to pull him away, Nellie leaned forward and embraced him. His shoulder was firm against her cheek, and her voice was muffled when she said, “How do I help him move on?”

She looked up at Luisa, who looked surprised. “I imagine Joel will tell you. Just be open to him being there. Be his tía.”

Nellie released Walter, who lowered himself from the chair and began to nose at his puppies, who were starting to roam off the blankets.
“You’ll have your hands full with those,” Nellie said.

“You sure you don’t want one when they’ve grown a little?”

Nellie shook her head. Commemorating another death with a dog felt like the beginning of a habit, one that ended with a household just like this one. She rose from the armchair, already planning dinner, and as Nellie aimed her car down the shallow incline of the mountain, scanning for coverage about the pope, Amador once again changed the station of his presence back to Paterson, where—

Joel

wanted to get off the bridge. He liked water enough, but not like this—not suspended over it, staring down through a grate so fine it rattled under foot traffic. He clutched Paulina to his chest not only for his own comfort, but to keep her wriggly body from leaving his arms for the abyss.

He glanced at Amador, who was staring over the edge. The ghost was hard to make out with all the mist in the air.

“My mom’s still on her way back,” said the ghost, not looking at him. “We’ll stay just a little bit longer.”

Joel searched for the part of him that was game, the part that was super accommodating and didn’t mind at all and would say something like, “Sure, no problem, I love this bridge,” and “In fact I could stand here all day.” He regarded his grandfather, seated a little crooked at the railing. Though his face had been mostly expressionless that day, he did seem… at peace, if content was a stretch. Joel figured he probably looked like that when Amador’s ghost found him, animating geese on the banks of Lake Eola. He loved it there: the artificially vibrant water, dyed blue-green for algae control. He loved that the lake was first a sinkhole. He loved sitting bare-armed, the sun on his tattoos. He loved feeling pleasantly sweaty, a candy glossy on Orlando’s hot tongue. He held a stack of sticky notes open
with his painted thumb and forefinger, sketching out the frames of a simple animation—geese in motion, their wakes spreading in graphite ripples across the square of yellow paper. And when he looked up, there was Amador, standing with his hands deep in the pockets of a sherpa-collared aviator, dusted with snow.

The two spoke rarely, not for any real reason, but in that cousin way that picks up after months like it’s nothing. He heard news of the death, but it was finals. He saw posts from the funeral online.

They’d been close as kids. Amador would step in if someone bombed Joel with Spanish, translating as the adults tutted at the various gaps in his raising. If Joel didn’t like something put on his plate, Amador helped him feed it to Bóbi. When Joel came out, Amador had commented hearts. This Amador, whose clothes still bore the snow he died under, was less himself—more one-track. And even so, Joel got the feeling this whole thing was still an extension of that old, familiar care, in whatever weird way it’d been magnified by death.

Joel rocked Paulina in his arms until the ghost said they should go, that Tía Nellie would need Joel’s help making dinner. He wasn’t sure how, but he knew not to argue. Joel’s mom had warned him about hauntings. *Pinch your nose and swallow,* she’d said. Let it run its course. Be grateful it’s only a visit. Her own mother had haunted her into moving back to New Jersey, and only departed when the last photo was hung at the new house in Sparta, a comfortable forty minutes away. The quicker the better, Joel’s mother told him. Ignoring your ghosts kept them around, and keeping your ghosts was for white people.

He put Paulina down, gripping her leash, and rolled Segundo’s chair away from the waterfall, grateful to get off the bridge.

Joel, the old man, the dog, and the ghost had just rounded the corner onto Walnut when a woman spotted them who brought to Joel’s mind a production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* he’d seen
at the black box on campus. The actor in the title role, stomping and clapping through the opening number, was only a twenty-something painted with age, but the effect now was similar: a grotesque mask, an approximation of a face in powder and pigment. Her wrinkles were deep, her lips overdrawn. Joel searched for a word, and his thoughts landed somewhere near *busted*. She was hustling, making a beeline.

“Does she know him?” Joel whispered to the ghost, who said, “That’s Doña Viola. Don’t tell her I’m here. My mom wouldn’t want her to know.”

“Don Segundo!” the woman said when she reached them, bending to kiss the old man’s cheeks. “Que gusto de verte afuera!”

She fixed her eyes on Joel, taking him in. She looked offput, then fixed her face.

“Buenas tardes, hijo. Soy vecina de tu tía. Me parece que eres el otro nieto de Don Segundo, ¿verdad?”

Joel joined her words to their meanings one by one, threading beads on a necklace. She was Tía Nellie’s neighbor. She guessed he was Segundo’s other grandson. After too long he said, “Si,” adding *señora* when her smile flattened and her penciled eyebrows rose. “Que tengo buen día.”

It was rude, he knew, but he was equipped with little else. He ended the conversation early.

“Igualmente,” she deadpanned. The warmth she’d led with was gone. “Ciao, Don Segundo,” she said as she sidestepped the wheelchair. She eyed Joel one last time, then walked off.

Joel was still trying to lay the wheelchair ramp across the front steps when his aunt drove past the house, parallel parking a way down the street and half-jogging to help him with it. He felt ill marching over the spot where Amador died. He faced anew the fact he’d stayed in a haunted house, and the thought was both thrilling and grim. He hustled his grandfather up the ramp and shut the
Tía Nellie settled Segundo back into the bedroom, his clothes still dotted with mist. Joel moved to help, but she waved him off.

“Let her do that,” Amador said.

“You said you brought me here to engage.” Joel had felt bad, the night before, for standing around while his aunt fixed up the second floor, knowing how hard it must have been for her—to know her son was in the room, to know Joel could see him and she could not. He wondered if she wished Amador had haunted her instead. Joel did. He wondered if he should say that to her, whether that would be nice or awful. He did not. And that night, lying awake in Amador’s bed, listening to the ghost’s unhelpful suggestions for “engagement”—the most upsetting of which involved playing Nellie’s favorite songs on Amador’s guitar, the ghost puppeteering his hands on the strings—Joel began to think there was nothing he could offer these people, this chunk of his family he was raised far away from, this cousin who had tasked him with his unfinished business, whatever that phrase even meant. He wondered what the end goal was supposed to be. For his part, Joel planned to fly home the moment he could.

“Help with cooking, like I said.” Amador brushed ghost-snow off the lapels of his aviator. In a moment there’d be more, and he’d do it again. “She might like that.”

So he did. He approached Tía Nellie as she lowered an apron over her head, her hooded eyes seeming to ask what he thought he was doing.

“Tell her I’m helping you,” Amador said. Joel hesitated. But when he did, in his halting way, she nodded, and set Joel to dicing red onions while she quartered a chicken. The dish was called pepián de choclo, a kind of thick stew unlike anything Joel had seen before. While she cooked zarandaja beans in hot oil, Joel loaded fat white corn into a blender, adding water and cilantro to the puree as it liquefied.
At one point the phone rang and Tía Nellie hurried out, pointing at the blender in a wordless *Keep going*.

The kitchen was tropically hot, despite the chill outside. Joel felt cooked, his skin beginning to smell like the onions and ajís in the pot. He felt woozy again. He dragged a forearm across his wet brow, then opened the blender and felt his stomach turn—a thick green paste, foam at the top, an evil matcha smoothie, something to clean up. When Tía Nellie returned from her phone call, Joel swiveled to ask for a restroom, and before he could speak her eyes widened to the size of the knobs on the stove.

“Lo sabia,” she said, moving him gently and lowering the heat. She placed a lid on the pot and opened the refrigerator. “Esa Viola es la muerte, lo juro.”

Joel spoke to Amador out the side of his mouth. “What’s happening? Did she say Viola?”

Tía Nellie pulled a carton of eggs from the fridge.

“That was her on the phone,” Amador said. “The neighbor. Letting her know she saw you and fishing for details. She thinks Doña Viola gave you the eye.”

“The eye?”

“You look sick. She figures you’ve been cursed.”

Joel’s mouth opened wordlessly as his aunt pulled out a chair and beckoned him to the small, square table. She selected an egg from the carton as he sat, motioning for him to take off his coat. When he did, she persisted. He pinched the sleeve of his sweater. “This too?” When she nodded, he said, “Really, I think I just overheated,” but Amador stopped him.

“Just let her,” he said.

Joel looked from the ghost to its mother. They both looked expectant, like this was something they’d waited for. He pulled his sweater over his head and tried not to flinch as Tía Nellie’s eyes darted
one by one to each of his tattoos. The constellation of the Archer; locked lips and pinky swears; a man on all fours fellating a sheet ghost, the fabric obscuring the act. He knew what kind of house he now sat shirtless in. Last night he’d heard Gregorian chanting rising up through the floorboards from his grandfather’s room. If this was engaging, he hoped Amador knew best.

Tía Nellie composed herself. She took Joel’s hand and lowered the cold eggshell to his skin, tracing it between each of his knuckles, across his palm, into the soft web of his thumb. She moved it up to his elbow and rose to stand behind him, massaging the egg between his shoulders, down his back. He wasn’t sure what she thought was happening, but he had to admit it felt good. He closed his eyes as she worked. When he opened them—

_Amador_

was gone. He’d taken his time guiding Joel to this moment, and as Nellie cracked the egg into a glass of water to check the whites for a banished curse, Amador had a sense that the ritual, this tenderness between his mother and Joel, however brief, had fulfilled the terms of his haunting. He’d take it.

He joined other ghosts in the street: old-timey factory workers, their legacies in disrepair; the latest winter’s homeless; generations of grandparents who yearned once to haunt their homelands, and yet were so unable to leave that everyone they could’ve haunted was gone. The Falls beckoned him just as Joel had, a beacon just a block away now. Time thinned as Amador moved through town. The shopfronts hung with Peruvian flags, Peruvian names, stretched on into a future he was now beginning to see. Wherever ghosts went, he guessed, after their hauntings, was everywhere, all the time, and he saw the street signs on Market and Mills change to say _Peru Square_, and even the headlines in the rack at Grand Street Pharmacy spoke of a name change that wouldn’t happen yet for ages; and ahead of
him Amador could see the Falls again, this time the way they’d be in a few years after closing for renovations and opening anew, the walkways wide and clean.

Amador walked out onto the corroded bridge. He joined with the mist, the rising white smoke, as somewhere Segundo’s radio erupted in cheers, the conclave at last at an end.
OLD QUEENS

The palmist made tea, which he stole from a client, while we waited for his apartment to shift backward in time. Most buildings did in the old part of town. He put pink tea in my hand and said, “I kept thinking, like, ‘She got all this hibiscus tea, and her skin looks like that?’ She wasn’t using it is all I’m saying.”

“Did she owe you something?” I asked.

“I don’t know, probably. I saw that tea and said—” he made a snatching motion—“Reparations, bitch!”

I sipped to look away from him. Probably he was kidding, but who knew. Knowing him took learning. He faked séances and cleansings for cash, and he liked it too much for me, but I lied just as low for the pennies I made, and we agreed not to judge one another.

The air lightened. The shift was starting.

“Here we go,” said the palmist. He reached his mug across my lap and waited, so I tapped mine to his. “To the Villa’s last homos.”

The changes began in the corner, where a blown lamp healed and lit under an amber shade. Crooked shelves straightened, making the palmist’s books on hoodoo bump around, astrology, chiromancy, divination. Water stains shrank on the popcorn ceiling. The split linoleum floor healed with soft, plastic zips, bright again after decades of scuffing. Everything chrome in the kitchen gleamed new. The rust on the A/C vanished. When the rough coffee table shined lacquered again, the room settled.

Behind the walls, dead pests moved.

“Are you gonna pretend to get those?” the palmist asked. Always needling.

“Do you want me to?”
“I’m kidding. That’s not why I called you.”

Mug down, he floated to his room, all big shirt and house shorts, light how he got when his apartment turned new and he could pretend to live lavish. That happened a lot at the Villas, which I was a kind of silver lining; all the ways to pin a moment in place mostly sucked. An event could be sharp or heavy. Loud would do. Put enough people’s rent out of reach and they slammed that hurt down like knives through tablecloth, handles wobbling, families filling the streets. Watch enough leases outlive their tenants and the neighbors drop their griefs heavy in corners like ballasts. In an average place a reversal was annual. But take a city like Hollywood—Florida, I mean—with streets named for Klansmen and a more successful blueprint in the west, and add a complex like Beachfront Villas, where homeless queers came and went like breath until the old house mother who owned it died and they all had to leave, and you had a building that time traveled a few times a week.

The palmist came out of his room in a flowing robe, fried, brassy hair in a scarf that hung down his chest. Eyes behind shades. “Who am I?” he said.

I couldn’t answer.

“Come on. ‘Call me now for ya free tarot readin!’”

Some kind of island accent, poorly done. Nothing connected.

He tossed his shades against an incense holder. “You never seen Miss Cleo?”

“No.”

The ginger had one TV. He didn’t watch psychics.

“I worked on her hotline before it went under.” The palmist reached into his sleeves and pulled out a pair of gold rods with bent handles. The longer arms arced like windshield wipers. “Anyway, these are the real surprise,” he said. “They’re called dowsing rods. Gold, aren’t you gagged? Just sit there while I practice. You don’t even have to talk.”
I knew of the palmist before we met. The bench outside my 7-Eleven showed his face and number. This was before I was fired for lifting snacks, discontinued ones, on those nights when the store traveled back to the dates of its shootings. Enthusiasts paid out for those. When that dried up I tried pest control, a job I lost fast for hoarding sprays and traps and slipping my personal under doors at job sites, for when dead things woke after hours. One of these was the Villas. Senior living. The complex was a two-story square with wraparound balconies, gray-pink like gum off a shoe. Stairs at intervals. A courtyard in the middle with a pool. The front shared a street with a cemetery, which shared a chain fence with a K-12. The circle of life.

I didn’t recognize the palmist the first time he called me. By then I was pouring window cleaner and hairspray into old bottles with company branding. Light coned from his door under the stairs before I could knock, outlining him. Bleach cooked his hair under a clear shower cap.

“I think it’s rats,” he said. “You got something for rats?”

Eventually he said, “Do people usually fall for this?” and avoiding his eyes meant looking at his framed star charts and bowls of crystals, his half-burnt stump of sage. My memory clicked. His eyebrows were blond that night, but it was him. The bench psychic. I would have bought anything then—the spirits gave me away, he read lies in my aura. Instead he said, “That ‘poison’ smells exactly like Vavoom Extra Hold.”

I said I’d go, but he offered me dinner. I refused. If I went home full the ginger would’ve asked whose money had fed me and where I’d put his cut.

But the palmist said he’d pay me to read my palms, which was my first lesson in not expecting him to make a lot of sense. Something about bullshitters sticking together. Something about spotting a closet case a mile away. If denying it would’ve done any good, I was too surprised to do it. He’d
moved on anyway. So I stayed.

#

The rods spun in the palmist’s fists as he sat next to me. “We’ll start with something easy,” he said. The rods stilled, parallel to each other, pointed at me. He closed his eyes. “Is this man a real exterminator?”

The rods swung apart, their ends almost touching his shoulders.

He peeked with one eye. “Hard no.” When the rods leveled out he said, “Has his bug ruse been profitable?”

They arced apart again.

The palmist gathered both rods into one hand. He reached for his tea with the free one. “I’d ask the rods, but I’ll ask you. Have you used the shit in that bag here at the Villas since I told you not to?”

I followed his eyes to the backpack slouched against the front door.

“No.”

“Yet you wear that every time you visit.”

He meant my shirt. Green, collared. PEST CONTROL on the back. The one I wore clean over the rags I slept in outside, salt-stiff from nights on the boardwalk. “Just habit I guess.”

“Habit, or appearances?” I shrugged. The rods went up again. “Is this man afraid what the neighbors might think?”

I smacked the rods out of touching.

“You’re moving them yourself.”

“Don’t be boring,” he said. “Play along for five seconds. This is my pro wrestling.”

For the second time I thought of the ginger, which I came over not to do. The ginger taught
me about kayfabe while I knelt between his sandals. The ones he wore with socks. Wrestling played on the screen at my back while the ginger reclined on his futon, head propped to see the TV over me. Light flickered across his face and his posters of women while he watched men pin other men to the ground. He would’ve hated the palmist. Too gay. From the moment I met him the palmist dripped color; rings on his fingers, things in his ears. Lavender dye when he got tired of blond. By comparison, the palmist was right. I was boring.

We went a few more rounds. The night stretched under us like an animal getting comfortable. He asked the rods if he should go mint next with his hair or pink; if he should call his sister back; if he missed out on college. He asked if I was packing, and when I interrupted the rods again he asked them if I was always been a prude. They swung apart. He tucked his chin, brows up.

“O dowsing rods,” he said. “This man a freak?”

Their ends crossed.

“Alright, you. Spill. I want the most depraved story you got.”

My tea was cold. Bits of hibiscus sloshed in it. I knew what he wanted, but the ginger lived there. “Not tonight.”

“Give me something.”

He wasn’t going to drop it. I figured I’d let him regret asking, if that were possible.

“A guy I lived with said he only fucked brown guys,” I said. “He said his white cock was a gift.”

The palmist dropped the rods to his lap, out of character. “Now that is some maximum caucacity. Some of us don’t deserve rights.”

I couldn’t look at him. An oscillating fan thumbed his curtains like pages it wanted to turn. The scabs of rust on the rattling A/C would grow in fast-forward like fungal bloom at the end of the
night, which I didn’t think I could watch. I said I needed a break and opened his patio door, expecting the screech of old metal. It slid smooth.

#

I did lie, about visiting his neighbors. The fisherman downstairs, who once had a stroke, told me things about the Villas once while I sprayed wood polish into the tracks of his patio door, overlooking the pool.

“Used to be a halfway house or some shit,” the old fisherman said from under a stained boonie hat. He said some kind of witch ran it then, getting rich off her spells and putting up fags who came south to die.

The Villas were still present-day when the fisherman called me. All his zombie pests sat still. I climbed his countertops, shirt over my nose, to spray over the cabinets, where a lizard’s skeleton stared out at me, half-buried in dust like a fossil. A trail connected its bones to other gaps in the grime, like it had moved and died a few times already. I pulled the frosted housing off the halogen tube in the fisherman’s kitchen and shook its dead roaches into the trash while school bells rang across the street.

“Imagine those kids having to see all that on their way home.” He dabbed the fallen corner of his mouth with a napkin, hand shaking. “One guy in a dress, the rest all touching each other. That kind of life has its place. This ain’t Dade. This ain’t the Manors.”

Outside, I watched the kids squeeze down the sidewalk between the graveyard and the Villas, blood fast through a tight vein.

The Villas were bleak in the sun. Cracks in the parking lot, exposed roofing tarps. Snails coating walls like mosaic tiles. The way the fisherman made it sound, the old gay witch of the halfway house had probably stood right where I was standing, before the building looked so ruined, and I thought my kid self would have traded anything to look up and see someone like her.
Blue light from the pool filled the square cutout in the middle of the complex. Usually the water was dark with sludge, lights dead.

Bare feet soaking, I checked the time. The reversal could end any minute. I tucked my cell in one empty shoe and leaned back on my hands, thinking about the one time I broke open around the ginger, cross-faded at a party at the house we shared. I was in my feelings about a cold snap in my teens that clogged the local bay with starved, dead manatees. That bay was empty now, but once a year the smell came back, the bay cycling its rot like clockwork. The ginger sat quiet beside me, and I tried to lean on him. He shoved me away before anyone could see.

The ginger was built. Firm. His parents put him up in a house of his own, small but private. Older but paid for. He listed the empty room I moved into, and I scammed for rent while he raked money in wearing FPL grays, coding the grids that kept Hollywood lit. High school wrestling star, he still tossed guys around at a private gym. Kept his house full of weights. We got along fine when I thought he was straight. Long as I thought that, we could drink like buddies, watch TV on his futon, an empty cushion between. But high together after dark, he said *Let me just show you* instead of describing an old move that put him heavy on me, breath and hair. We didn’t stop what happened. We didn’t talk about. I kept leaving in bug-man green, pulling in rent he didn’t need.

A sliding door rolled open behind me. I would leave if I had to.

Crowded as the boardwalk got—often as the tourists shooed me away—the beach was better than who the ginger turned out to be. He dropped me quick. Poured what I opened out for everyone else. Left home lots of nights. Brought guys over to love them loud, walls thin. That much didn’t hurt. I wasn’t attached. It hurt we all shared a color. It hurt to find out why. His neighbors didn’t ask about his guests, the ones they never saw sneak in or out at night, but they asked about me. There all the
time. Dropping the act. Getting comfortable. Getting dumb. By the time someone asked him how long we’d been together—not lived, been, he was sure—it was all the ginger needed to put me out.

Wind skimmed chlorine off the top of the water. Under that, weed. I turned. The palmist was there, huffing pot down his nostrils at me.

“Tired of my company?” he asked.

I stayed quiet. More wind gasped through the courtyard and his clothes caught it, whipping like flags. The tip of his joint brightened.

“Come back up before Papi Chulo sees you,” he said, pointing up at the fisherman’s doors. “I figure he’s up there wondering why everything you sprayed for is still coming to life.”

So he knew. Like a real mind reader. “I’m sorry.”

The palmist shrugged. “You would’ve had my blessing. I didn’t live the life I lived to see a man like that move into Mother P’s old place.”

“Mother P.”

“Paloma. After that club the Klan set on fire.”

Always doing that. Making me feel a step behind, talking like I was his age, like there was shit I should know about gays fleeing Castro or the “citrus bitch” who got pied in the face, or every gay landmark that didn’t exist anymore from here to the Keys. Something about my blank face set him off. “You don’t know shit about shit, huh.”

“Don’t say that to me.”

“Learn something, I won’t have to.” Inhale, exhale. Smoke in the air. “You could’ve learned a lot from living here back in the day. Some of the men used to fill this pool would’ve changed your life.” He described their bodies, wall to wall, totem stacked, wet skin on wet skin. He said Paloma would stand at her balcony and watch them while the music played, swishing her fingers like she was
conducting it. All love. All family. Those men hadn’t splashed there in years, but I felt like I just missed
them. Like I caught them toweling off and they’d all had their fill. Like I was alone in the water, calling
out at their backs.

“I think Paloma would’ve liked you,” he said.

“Do you even like me?”

“I’d like you more if you stopped lying to me.”

I had to laugh. “What am I lying about now?”

“I think we both know.”

I snatched my feet out of the water and stood, his height. “I think we both know you’re not a
real psychic. You wanna talk about a liar? You only invite me when the building changes. When you
can play rich and wear your costumes. You pretended not to know about the fisherman. Now what?
What else aren’t you telling me?”

The water greened again, algae from edges to middle.

The palmist puffed again before answering. “The things I wear belonged to my friends. I feel
close to them when everything looks like it did. Before the Villas became a damn nursing home.” He
looked up at me as the pool light gave up and died. “I invite you because I’ve seen you sleeping on
that beach.”

The palmist groaned standing up, flicking the burnt roach into the dark.

“You’re welcome to join me, if you’ll indulge another surprise.”

“I’m done getting read,” I said.

“I’m done reading.”

He swept up the stairs, leaving me alone.

#
Upstairs, the apartment was empty. Everything fixed was broken, rats quiet, lamp out. Somewhere a TV whined that I didn’t know he owned. The palmist peeked out of his room and waved me in for the first time ever, rings flashing.

His room was all framed photos. Handsome men looked out of them, their ghosts still splashing downstairs. The palmist perched his butt on the foot end of a sagging four-poster, squinting at a remote in the light of the tube.

Arms spread over a phone number, the paused image on the screen had to be Miss Cleo. The resemblance was clear.

“I started taping her specials after Paloma died,” he said. “She reminds me of her. Scam though she did, Mother P took her tarot seriously. It’s the one thing I read for real.” The palmist hit play. Cleo said the phrase from earlier. “And just last year, she came out as a les in *The Advocate*. One of us after all. Even had kids with a gay man, before the virus took him. We love a beard.”

I picked up a frame full of bodies.

“Did they all die that way?”

The palmist smiled small. “Not all of them. Not even most. Most of the old queens scattered.”

“No you.”

“No. Felt I had to pay something forward here at the Villas.” A laugh. “Always tryna be someone’s mother.”

Cleo laid tarot like solitaire, searching for futures and people’s kids’ dads. A record player sat quiet next to the screen. All the battered sleeves under it showed names I’d never heard, dead gays he’d tell me all about if I asked, so I didn’t. I was tired. With time, he’d tell me anyway. I hadn’t expected the night to end there. A man’s bed, his TV, a performer keeping kayfabe, a fan eating it up. Too familiar. I could smell the ginger’s soap, and his sweat, and my spit. I felt his carpet on my knees.
I should’ve wanted to run, but the mattress gave just right under my weight. My eyes drooped. My head fell painfully down to my chest, and I started awake. The palmist noticed.

“Lie back, hon. Stay here tonight.”

I shook my head. He told me not to be stupid.

The palmist lowered the volume but left it on. I rolled over under the sound of Miss Cleo’s predictions. Here and there the palmist laughed to himself, the sounds of the callers adding voices to the room.
FOREIGN CONSTELLATIONS

En route to the beach that exposed people’s thoughts, Eggie sang to the darkening highway and hoped, manifested, that Sebastian would join in.

It was too quiet, even singing. Even with the radio beneath that and the white noise of tires beneath that. He couldn’t even count on the GPS to speak. The ride to his friend Javier’s new condo was a lot of long, straight lines—that was Florida for you—and he hadn’t received a direction in so many miles that he tensed at every intersection, like the navigator would spring the turn on him for a laugh. Sebastian sat in the passenger, silently scratching under his beard. Flakes fell on his sturdy chest, and Eggie found it a bit surreal to see his handsome, confident partner pluck his shirt the way Eggie did when he found his belly unflattered. What was this like for him? Eggie wished he could read the flakes in the air like star maps, like thrown bones.

Sebastian had reservations, naturally. Nonlocals usually did. Total honesty was a tall ask, after all. So even when he agreed and agreed again, Eggie offered him an out. He wanted to be the kind of boyfriend who always gave an out.

“We can still cancel,” he’d said, reaching. “Your doctor said you shouldn’t submerge your biopsies anyway.”

But those had healed, of course, the crusted gauzes phased out, creams prescribed to keep the diagnosed eczema quiet. Sebastian refused every new excuse, sounding more annoyed each time. When he stalled at bedtime, Eggie sat wondering if he’d done too much, asked for one too many reassurances. The thought had made him nauseous. But then they did that thing Eggie loved, where they spoke at once, in a jinx. “Are you coming to bed?” he’d asked, and then, remembering, said Your as Sebastian said My, and together they said: lotion’s too fresh, and Sebastian had smiled and said, “Yeah. It’ll get on the sheets,” and Eggie knew they were fine, they’d been fine, they’d be fine. He’d thought...
so, at least. If the beach did its thing, he’d find out soon enough.

On the navigation screen, Merritt Island flattened to a grid of roads and solid colors, roving by as Eggie drove forward.

Last time he’d come, he was small. His mother did the driving. Reclaiming anything started with the small, Eggie thought he’d heard somewhere, and being in charge of the gyroscopic arrow on the screen felt like one such first-small-thing. Like a compass needle, almost. He liked that a lot. They drove east and east as the sun set behind them, crossing bridge after bridge, until the GPS finally dictated the turns that led to Javier’s condo, and the Atlantic came slowly into view.

Sebastian spoke at last. “So Javier really lives right on the beach, huh? You weren’t kidding?”

“Nope!” Eggie said. His relief started him. “Seaside property, baby.”

He felt a rush of pride for Javier. That he'd made so much of himself, come so far since the time Javi had saved him. Javi would say they'd saved each other, but the facts were that Javi had a place when Eggie was thrown out, had become an older brother to him, and a new place on the water was exactly what that man deserved. That wasn’t the part that impressed Sebastian, Eggie knew. It was Cape Canaveral, just across the Banana River from where Javier had moved in. Countdowns and launches. The final frontier. Eggie’s mother had fostered a similar love in him once, there on Merritt Island, but she’d also scrawled a memory there over the stars that Eggie couldn’t wash away, and outer space was a much harder thing to reclaim.

#

Sebastian made sure to beat the dust from his shirt before approaching the front door with Eggie, careful to shoulder his tote bag of treatments, his change of clothes. If the beach was going to lay him bare later, he figured he’d start with a good impression and come prepared to handle a flare-up.
He didn’t know what to expect of this friend Javier. All he knew was Eggie spoke of this beach the way an old roommate had talked about shrooms, and referred to the community around it like they all shared one spirit. He didn’t trust it. That anyone should have that kind of access to another’s thoughts—that one could stand nearby in the surf and feel, as clearly as the warmth of piss or blood, whatever truths the water drew from within him—felt like a monstrous invasion of privacy. But then there was Eggie. Eggie’s desire to know, and be known. Eggie for whom meet my mom was no option, making come see my hometown impossible to refuse. Eggie who dealt with a lot when Sebastian’s skin turned almost overnight, when he bloodied their sheets and raked dust from his arms.

What a dud that diagnosis had been, and what a relief. Eczema. An awakening gene. A welcome if frustrating anticlimax, with no cure and no end.

But in those frightened weeks, when the biopsies could have returned anything, Eggie had shown who he was to Sebastian. And Sebastian figured there was a lot he would do for a person like that.

Javier was short and fit, stubbled and tank-topped. He smacked Sebastian between the shoulder blades during a one-armed hug, and Sebastian steeled himself against the itch that prickled there. Javier called the place a “bungalow,” which Seb didn’t think applied. When his partner Audra materialized, the two of them talked of a cleansing ritual that was supposed to open them all to the effects of the beach, or provide a good environment to return to, or something, or neither. Sebastian wished he cared more.

“Like coming from the spa and having clean sheets,” Audra explained.

Sebastian measured his comments. Eggie had once excitedly tried to attribute Sebastian’s whole personality to some aspect of his star chart, and gotten deeply hurt when Sebastian called it proselytizing. Sebastian wondered how hard that would be to bite back until morning. Seeing Eggie
laugh with Javier, though, making inside jokes and smacking arms, looking more at home in his body than he often did elsewhere—knowing what the two had shared, and seeing what the island was already doing for him—made Sebastian feel eager to try.

Javier set out four shallow bowls and poured cloudy water into them from a tall pitcher. “This is water from the beach,” he said, handing out the bowls.

Sebastian took a bowl and tried not to look wary. In Eggie’s eyes were both apology and plea.

“Think of an intention,” Javier continued, stirring the water with his fingertips. “Then flick it anywhere and say, ‘Cleanse and clear.’”

He encouraged them to scatter. Sebastian found himself on a self-guided tour of the “bungalow,” sprinkling water into corners and crevices. “Cleanse and clear,” he sighed. “Cleanse and clear.” His intention? God only knew. That Eggie would know what he meant to him, he guessed. If he had any intention, it was that. He went in and out of rooms, flicking salt water on everything, and Javier found him standing still in front of a diagrammed night sky, framed and mounted over a toilet. The stars were familiar—he’d studied them fiercely in remote Belle Glade, where light pollution didn’t reach—but there were drawings overlaid on this one, applied on the glass in metallic silver ink. They grouped stars in ways he’d never seen, a wholly unfamiliar group of constellations.

“They’re Quechua. Inca constellations,” Javier explained, his own bowl in one hand, the pitcher he’d filled it from in the other. He placed it on a dish beside the sink. “Eggie made it for me when he got his first place and moved out. If you’re the space man he says you are, I’m sure he’s told you how close we are to the Space Center?”

“He sure has.” He was still staring at the frame.

“No launches scheduled tonight, I’m afraid. You’ll just have to come back sometime.” He elbowed Sebastian’s arm and led him out onto the dark front step, where everyone but Sebastian took
They had to cross a backroad on foot to reach the beach. Their path led through a tight opening in a tall hedge of sea grapes. Eggie remembered gathering their wide, waxy leaves and splaying them in his hands like fans, cooling his own face with one and his mother’s with the other. She always made him leave them behind. Just inside the hedge, a sign warned of dangerous marine life.

“What’s this about?” Sebastian asked the group.

“Area’s known for jellies on and off,” said Audra. “Pretty rare you actually bump into one.”

“Flashlights on, and watch your step,” Javi called from the front of the group. “These little sand crabs like to come on up at night. We’ll spot for their burrows and try to find a good place for our blanket. Then we can strip.”

Sebastian stumbled. “Is it a nude beach?”

“Not really,” Audra said. “But it’s empty.”

She and Javi forged ahead, sweeping their phone flashlights left to right. Eggie grew uneasy in their absence, wondering what Seb would say next; he’d kept up beautifully with the woo-woo antics to that point, and Eggie found himself wondering how much more would prove to be too much.

“Is stripping down supposed to help with—I don’t know, oneness? Like the gummies?” Sebastian asked, finally. “This doesn’t even sound like you.”

Eggie felt the tide tugging on his truths even sooner than expected. It didn’t feel like him either. He felt reckless. He didn’t know where it came from, didn’t know where to look. Ghost-white crabs fled the arc of his flashlight beam. “I think they just do it to do it. I’ve kind of always wanted to try,” he admitted. “Never had the confidence before now.”

“So we’re calling this growth?”
“Is there some reason you think I shouldn’t?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Sebastian took a beat. “I meant to swim in a shirt. I don’t like my body right now.”

Now that was too much. “Okay, join the club,” Eggie said before he could stop it. “I thought we could do this together.”

The edible was working. He felt a squeezing and lengthening at the back of his skull, like his thoughts had to pass through a bottleneck, spaghettified in transit. He might have felt petulance, or regret, but they didn’t survive.

“I agreed to come to this beach,” Sebastian said. “I agreed to get in the water. I feel like the rest of this is just—well, not just, but I feel like part of you thinks the rest would piss off your mom.”

Eggie stopped hard and looked at him. “What?”

“Which is fine! Do what you have to. I’ve just never seen you like this.”

“You’ve never seen me at home. I’m showing you where I came from. If you’re only interested in assumptions you can stay out of the fucking water.”

He stormed ahead, sand flying as his feet struck the peaks off the tiny sand dunes. He forgot to look out for the crabs and felt dimly bad about it, the guilt washed out by the nova behind his eyes. He caught up to Javi and Audra, who were placing their shoes on the corners of a patterned blanket. They asked about Sebastian, still a ways down the beach, and neither seemed upset that he might not be joining them. Javi pulled off his tank and stretched, the moonlight just touching the curved scars under each of his pecs. Javier’s was a body loved completely, though it hadn’t always been. Why did Eggie find it so hard? He’d meant for this to be a debut—of himself as the kind of boyfriend who’d conquered self-image. Eggie hated to backslide. Somehow he was early-days Eggie again, weeping in bed beside Sebastian after sex, wondering aloud if he was desired.
“Would I do this,” Sebastian had said, suddenly cupping his balls, “if I didn’t find you desirable?”

They’d laughed in the moment, but there had to be more. Didn’t there? Anything so easily held could be easily released.

“You taking the plunge?” Javi asked. Button open, zip down. Audra was already halfway down the beach, just a shape in the dark from this distance.

“Go on down first,” Eggie said, adding his shoes to the blanket. “I’ll join when your backs are turned.”

“You got it.” Javi turned, dropped his shorts, and ran bare to the water’s edge, hollering to Audra.

Eggie listened to Javi’s splashing and removed his clothes slowly. His jeans, then his socks. His shirt. He folded each and stacked them with his shoes, then folded his arms and hesitated. The breeze off the ocean raised goosebumps across his skin, the hair that covered him standing at attention, and he passed his palms over his trunk alone in the gloom, smoothing and feeling, learning and unlearning. The briefs came last. He stared straight ahead as he marched to the water’s edge, thinking to himself, in a canned kind of way he wanted to mean, that it didn’t matter if Sebastian saw him do this; that some milestones were just for him. He entered the water to shoulder height, and felt the currents begin to weave his thoughts like ribbons with the others’.

#

Awed as many times as he’d been by Eggie and his past, Sebastian had to wonder if it was foolish to be surprised by anything anymore. Still, watching from a distance while Eggie waded naked into blackened waves held its own against the rest.

That he could be such a happy and sentimental person after all he’d been through; that he’d
been the “kind of gay” who got thrown out of his home, back when Sebastian thought you had to be an addict or a cross-dresser or carrying something bad to be one of those. Sebastian grew up unnoticed in Belle Glade, where he spent his days on four-wheelers being chased by dogs, his future consigned to the sugarcane fields or the processing plant on the horizon. His parents hadn’t looked at him often enough to know who he was, and he didn’t visit enough for it to be a problem now. He’d been stunned and amazed when Eggie said he and his mother shared everything, and that was before Eggie told him about the beach. That had been a whole different story.

Sebastian gazed over the three heads in the water. The sky was clear and layered with stars, salt thrown across cast iron. It must have looked just like that, he thought, the night Eggie’s mother disowned him.

“It’s a sad one,” Eggie’d said under a restaurant space-heater. And it was. He’d told it on a holiday in St. Augustine that they took when neither had family to visit.

Eggie’s trips to the beach with his mom were a regular thing, he said, something she started before he could even stand. She’d take him there in her arms to understand him, to let their love steep around and pass between them. As he grew, she let the water carry everything out of her—all the things a child shouldn’t have had to bear for his mother. She was depressed, Eggie said, her past landmined with regrets. He’d shouldered it with her because it was all he knew to do. “I thought somehow,” Eggie said into his appetizer, “if the water spread those feelings between both of us, she’d have less to carry.” This continued until high school, when Eggie met Javier. Different name then, different build, a senior on his way out, but the two saw difference in each other. By the time Eggie’s mother detected their friendship in the waves around Eggie that summer, Javier had graduated, gotten a place, begun his transition. She’d seen enough. She’d seen too much.

It was the night of a launch when it happened, Eggie recalled. They couldn’t hear the
countdown from across the river, but the flames were a sunrise, a perfect yellow ball.

“I’m taking you home after this,” she had said, as the rocket curved over their heads. “You’re to pack a bag and leave. I don’t care where you go.”

No wonder he’s stayed away this long, Sebastian thought. A thing like that had a way of ruining a place forever.

Sebastian heard singing down at the water. Three voices getting louder, asking each other if they still recalled the fateful night they crossed the Rio Grande.

The lyrics were familiar, Sebastian realized; Eggie had sung them in the car on the way there that evening, as the sun set. That Swedish group—he couldn’t conjure the name, which he imagined Eggie would find shocking. He had a way of gasping at Sebastian’s lapses in culture; full theatrics, fainting spells.

“It’s not even a deep cut!” Eggie complained. “If it’s on their Gold record, there’s just no excuse.”

They’d watched so many movies this way, listened to so many albums. Eggie taught him the classics, built up his vocabulary, took him to Pride, paid forward all that Javier had done when he took Eggie in as a baby gay, fifteen with nowhere to go.

Sebastian felt fifteen in this regard. He’d known so little for so long. The adjustment was slow and it didn’t come naturally. He felt sure for a while he’d exhaust Eggie’s patience, but Eggie showed no signs of cracking until now, which was no small miracle. Growth, progress, reclamation; all the words Eggie brought out of his online circles and into Sebastian’s life. And Sebastian was glad he did. They clearly brought Eggie a measure of peace, helped him work on himself and feel like he was working on himself. But sometimes Sebastian’s suspicions came knocking: the ones that felt safest calling out echo chambers, the ones that stood back to squint at anything remotely cultish. And there,
on the beach, each one of them was firing. He knew Eggie could tell. He imagined it was frustrating.

*If you’re only interested in assumptions…*

Sebastian sighed, the sound lost on the wind. What would a dip in these waters really cost? A bit of discomfort? An extra coat of lotions? If this was what Eggie needed, so be it. That man deserved whatever peace Sebastian stood to give him.

Sebastian was pulling off his clothes when the yelling began.

#

Eggie could hear his friends’ voices inside and out, with his ears and his soul. They sang “Fernando” a cappella while the water carried the studio recording between them, in their chests, and the compounding lift of their mingled highs made the breeze on their skin chill threefold. When he thought, *I can’t believe Sebastian wouldn’t sing this with me*, the other two responded without moving their lips.

*That’s fuckin’ wild,* came Javi’s voice.

*Criminal,* said Audra’s.

Eggie almost said more, but he thought better of it. The thoughts curling outward from Javi and Audra were pleasant and warm, even a little racy. He didn’t want to ruin that. Of course, thinking that made him think of Sebastian, sitting stormed-away-from up on the beach. Why had he done that? Of *course* Sebastian could have just come to the water dressed. That should never have been an issue. His overreaction flared, in Eggie’s mind, bright enough to illuminate them all—to expose even his nudity underwater and make him want to hide. He could feel himself getting worked up. There were things he was glad Sebastian wasn’t there to hear or feel, things he’d hoped never to give breath. Who could blame Sebastian for growing up a private person? Or for having been beautiful all his life while Eggie worked to feel that way? What kind of monster thought even for a second, that Sebastian’s new
dryness and rashes could be a balancing of the scales?

Eggie felt nauseous again. So distance was best after all. Why hadn’t he seen that sooner? Look where knowing everything had gotten Eggie and his mother.

He panicked a little about his company sensing his meltdown, but then the current changed beneath them and swept everything he’d just released into the water away.

Cleanse and clear. Etch-a-Sketch. Love notes on a fogged shower stall.

Maybe now was a good time to get back to the sand, Eggie thought. Maybe there would be something to salvage. And then whatever the current had just carried in wrapped around his calf, and the pain was immediate.

Eggie wailed, wordless and confused. In his head his leg was wrapped in coils of glowing tungsten filaments, incandescent orange and searing his flesh.

Javi and Audra were shouting for him, swimming nearer as he realized what happened.

“Jellyfish!” he warned. “I got stung on the leg!”

The two of them paused, scanning the water, and a light from the shore came charging into the shallows. Eggie spun to see Sebastian, phone flashlight aloft, high-kneeing through the surf directly toward him. He swept the beam around like a lighthouse lamp while Eggie tried to wade closer to him, and Eggie became overwhelmed.

The pain was gigantic. So was his shame. The embarrassment, the ruined plans; the scheme he’d pulled to get Sebastian to the water to see if was really all-in, when Eggie himself was thinking thoughts Sebastian could leave him for; the shame of having doubted him; the shame of needing so much. The essence of everything he felt melted off him like the rings of a jawbreaker dissolving. They stretched out around him: pink adoration, blue apologies, mad scarlet pain. It came at once, bursting out in frantic auroras, and at this distance, with the surf crashing inward past Eggie, there was no way
Sebastian wouldn’t feel it.

Sebastian dragged him from the water, Eggie hopping on one foot. Javi caught up and took the other arm.

“Where’s the nearest hospital?” Sebastian asked, his voice thin. “What can we do?”

“We can treat him at home,” Audra yelled, charging uphill for the blanket. She pulled on her clothes without drying off as the men shouldered Eggie’s weight between them.

“She’s right,” said Javi. “We’ve had our share of stings. He’ll be fine.”

“He’ll be fine?”

“I will,” Eggie said, sucking air through his teeth. “Is it still on me?”

Sebastian checked, reporting only angry welts. That was good, Eggie thought. In fact, it felt like more than he deserved.

#

Sebastian was in full flare-up by the time they were back inside. His neck, the backs of his legs, the crooks of his arms were all red and inflamed, almost waxy-looking. He slapped them to keep from scratching and scratched them anyway. The humid night, the salt water, the sweaty half-jog back through the hedge—not to mention the stress of seeing Eggie injured, or the truths he’d intercepted in the water. Sebastian’s eczema didn’t stand a chance.

Javi helped Eggie into the bathroom still draped in the sandy beach blanket, his t-shirt and briefs underneath. There was no way the jeans were going back on. Audra came in behind with Sebastian’s bag of potions and assorted shoes and socks, and Sebastian lunged for his products. An eye cream, a cortisone, an ointment just for emergencies. Something for his beard. A lotion for the rest of him. Chapstick. An antihistamine, a change of clothes. His hands trembled as he rummaged through, dropping things to scratch the itches that most needed his attention, and when he got like
this there was nothing else for it than to ask Audra for a shower.

“It’s just the one,” she said, pulling vinegar from her cabinets. “Take this with you, if you’re heading that way.”

In the bathroom, Javi was adjusting the faucet handles. Eggie was perched on the side of the tub with his legs inside. Sebastian knocked on the doorframe with the bottle of vinegar.

“I was just coming for that,” Javier said, reaching.

“Do you mind if I take it from here?” Sebastian said over the running water. He gestured at his rashes. “I need the shower too, actually. Having a thing.”

Door closed behind Javi, Sebastian knelt beside Eggie and unscrewed the vinegar cap, but Eggie made him stop.

“Please just shower,” he said. “I can do this. You look really uncomfortable.”

So he did. He undressed, stepping over Eggie and pulling the diverter to make the showerhead run. The cool water was everything. He did his best to use only his palms, to avoid opening wounds with his nails. Behind him, Eggie ran vinegar down his leg, which washed past Sebastian’s feet and down the drain, and when he finished Sebastian plugged the drain and let the water run a moment more while he moisturized from head to toe.

“What’s that for?” Eggie asked of the rising water.

“You’ll see.” Towel about his waist, Sebastian padded barefoot to the sink and lifted the pitcher of ocean water from its dish beside the sink. He poured what was left into the ankle-high bathwater and sat beside Eggie, their feet submerged.

“You don’t have to do this, Sebastian.”

Sebastian only looked into his eyes. “I love you,” he mouthed, making no sound at all.

“I shouldn’t keep making you prove that.”
“I know why you do.” He reached for Eggie’s hand and passed his thumb across the back of it. “So. What do you want to know?”

Eggie snorted. “Uh, so much. But not like this. I’d actually like to show you something, if that’s okay.”

Sebastian nodded. Eggie closed his eyes, concentrating, and kicked his foot toward Sebastian’s. A vision wafted over to him, dimly at first, gaining strength. The same beach they’d just left, the night just as dark and starry. A view from inside the water. A woman flickered in and out of view, then vanished. For a moment Sebastian panicked, afraid he was about to see that memory, but Eggie said, “Bear with me. I’m editing as I go.”

The woman didn’t come back, but a light bloomed to life across the water, massive and pale, illuminating the entire sky and horizon like a sunrise at double speed. Slowly the ball rose away from the earth, shrinking as it went, lighting clouds from underneath and then within and then above as it pierced them at the end of a tail of black smoke. And beneath all of that, superimposed over the stars, Sebastian thought he could make out the silver-inked shapes of the Quechua constellations, the same shapes he couldn’t make sense of on the wall just feet away.

Sebastian squeezed Eggie’s hand, the only thing still tethering him to the tub in Javier’s bathroom. He let out a low whistle. “Beautiful.”
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2. Bless Me, Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya
3. What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky, Lesley Nneka Arimah
4. Mostly Dead Things, Kristen Arnett
5. The Boys of My Youth, Jo Ann Beard
6. The Man Who Shot My Eye Out Is Dead, Chanelle Benz
7. Things That Fall From the Sky, Kevin Brockmeier
8. Gods of Want, K-Ming Chang
9. Man & Wife, Katie Chase
10. The House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros
11. Piranesi, Susanna Clarke
12. Any Other Place, Michael Croley
13. How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water, Angie Cruz
14. The Shell Collector, Anthony Doerr
15. Potted Meat, Steven Dunn
16. Like Water for Chocolate, Laura Esquivel
17. The Ocean at the End of the Lane, Neil Gaiman
18. Florida, Lauren Groff
19. Matrix, Lauren Groff
20. Fuckface, Leah Hampton
21. Break the Bodies, Haunt the Bones, Micah Dean Hicks
22. None But the Righteous, Chantal James
23. Antipodes, Holly Goddard Jones
24. The Green Mile, Stephen King
25. I Know You Know Who I Am, Peter Kispert
26. What We Fed to the Manticore, Talia Lakshmi Kolluri
27. Everything Everywhere All At Once, Daniel Kwan & Daniel Scheinert
28. Get in Trouble, Kelly Link
29. Her Body and Other Parties, Carmen Maria Machado
30. Undoing, Kim Magowan
31. Antiman, Rajiv Mohabir
32. Milk Blood Heat, Dantiel W. Moniz
33. Ghostographs: An Album, Maria Rosasco Moore
34. Bronze Drum, Phong Nguyen
35. Shadowselves, Jason Ockert
36. What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours, Helen Oyeyemi
37. Drinking Coffee Elsewhere, ZZ Packer
38. The Rock Eaters, Brenda Peynado
39. The Secret Lives of Church Ladies, Deesha Philyaw
40. The Heaven of Animals, David James Poissant
41. Burning Bright, Ron Rash
42. American Masculine, Shann Ray
43. The Ones Who Don’t Say They Love You, Maurice Carlos Ruffin
44. *Mammoth*, Zachary Schomburg
45. *The Prettiest Star*, Carter Sickles
46. *Afterparties*, Anthony Veasna So
47. *The Pearl*, John Steinbeck
48. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong
49. *Salvage the Bones*, Jesmyn Ward