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THOUGH I KNOW THE RIVER IS DRY

by

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B.A. College of Charleston, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
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ABSTRACT

Though I Know the River is Dry is a place-oriented collection of short fiction. The included stories follow female protagonists as they struggle with identity, relationships, and place in the world. The women in these stories frequently grapple with the fear of being loved in the wrong way, often unearthing a deeper examination of what it means to be tethered to a person or a place, along with the ramifications of these ties. All tangentially related to the island of Martha's Vineyard, place serves as a grounding element in this collection, as well as an entity with which the women interact.

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THAT SUMMER

The pamphlet detailing the history of the Gingerbread Cottages leaves out the good stuff, like the fact that Valentine House was originally blue, but painted pink when the owner's wife left him for an across the street neighbor. Pink was his wife's least-favorite color, not a high five to Saint Valentine. When I'm not handing out pamphlets to tourists, I herd teenaged hikers up the mulched paths at Great Rock. At the summit, I dole out band aids for blisters, unfurl extra pairs of socks. As the kids sprawl on mossed boulders and pant, I point to the curve of clay cliffs, the black patches of burned out forest. On cloud free days, I crane my neck to see the glint of Quonset pond through thick trees and when light flares off the still surface I think about that summer.

#

What we did. Built grainy drip castles from wet sand scooped from the sickled shore of Menemsha Pond then jiggled, shrieking, until the castles were flattened and sand was just sand. Bought chewy bricks of fudge from Murdick's with dollars, canines sinking into tooth-numbing sweetness until our bellies ached and our mouths were brown O's. Bus rides, hitch hiking, the ghost of dust rising from dirt roads. Toes pushing through sneakers, paper bag lunches, phone numbers of boys. Our mothers' gentle fingers sifted through our tangled, salty hair feeling for swollen bodies of blood-fat ticks. Slept fitfully in sand-heavy sheets. Heaved rocks at the matted rumps of the three goats penned in Dee's backyard. That summer we were the self-proclaimed Losers of Maple Street and me, Leslie, and Dee guzzled foaming beers stolen from our parents' garages on the spongy planks of Leslie's treehouse. Crashed Dee's hand-me-down Buick

through the front wall of Poole's Fish Market. Sat dazed as brick crumbled around us, touched fingertips to faces then belly laughed to see lobsters with blue-bound claws teetering on tiny legs in the middle of the street, the glass of the shattered tank glistening in the light of Dee's beams. Held our hands aloft, mimicked the lobsters' fused claws, "I am not a crook," we echoed in unison to flashing red and blue. "I am not a crook."

#

The Maple Mansion had never lived up to its name, no matter how many times we pounded a cylinder of metal into its ridged bark and waited, gape-jawed, for the sticky flood. Younger us had climbed scrap wood rungs hammered into the side then swung through the trap door to give our baby dolls Kool Aid dye jobs and Elmer's mohawks. Walls tacked with boybanders and pink-tongued puppies, names of crushes heart-ringed in a spiral notebook.

#

We three drank filched wine mixed with apple juice from the thimble cups of Dee's cracked tea set, circled a cigarette. Legs dangled over the railed sides of the treehouse, splinters cozying into the flesh of our thighs. From our perch, backyards unfolded. Panes of windows, jars of doors, our old-man neighbor in banana print boxers pacing the hallways of his glass-walled house. A creep, our mothers called him, a title that scared and excited and so we buzzed his doorbell on moonless nights then bolted into the thick woods. On flexing branches robins echoed our laughter.

#

We were bored, so we sloshed wine and lipped cigarettes from a soft pack. Leslie flicked the lighter and our lungs buoyed, and we shaded our eyes from the climbing, orange-burning sun. We snipped temp tats from dollar store books, wetted skulls and roses and roaring lions to our

knuckles. Over pork chops and lentils, we threw gang signs at our siblings until our mothers shooed us to bathrooms to pick the sticky ink from creased fingers. That summer we were so bored we tried to raise the dead.

#

We had better things to do than watch the news but we still heard about the hurricane. Boats belly up, boarded windows and doors. COME ON IRENE spray painted on barricades of plywood. In our pantries, our mothers counted gallons of water as we rolled our eyes. We were not scared of the storm and, as our neighbors filled back up gas tanks, we spent the night before she was supposed to hit in the treehouse. In the flickering candles, Dee drove the Ouija board's triangle, calling Leslie's Uncle Bob from his ocean grave and, when the wind sighed and the candles blinked, our skin crawled under the smudge of a clouded moon.

#

The storm sapped power for three days and we were house-ridden. We tried our walkie talkies but our over, over, overs yielded silence. We shared beds with our siblings, lit candles, flushed toilets with standing water drawn from bathtubs. Our shingles popped, basements flooded. Wind popcorned sand at windows and doors and our mothers swept hard wood over and over before throwing brooms to floors in defeat. Our dads got drunk then paced then passed out and we drained leftover flat beers. When the eye stilled, we thought it was over, and we rushed for the porch, only to be slapped back by our mothers. "But we want out," we shrilled. We were solemn, we were glum, but in the dark we shaped ourselves to the sickled backs of our siblings.

#

Spindle-legged crabs sucked air in backyards and beached fish flopped as water receded and streetlights flared. In the harbor shops, flood lines reached windowsills. Armed with power tools, our fathers amputated splintered branches of trees. A call from Leslie's mom sent us down the street to flock with neighborhood kids. The goats had gotten loose, we were told, the door to the hutch swiped by Irene and the dumb animals had stumbled bleating, bleeding into the storm.

#

Crisis thrilled, so we pulled on our fathers' muck boots and hiked deer trails through the rain-trampled grass listening for the chatter of the missing goats. We peered through the shuttered windows of summer people and boasted to one another that it would be easy to slip a lock, to kick back on suede sofas, to help ourselves to loaded liquor cabinets, to bathroom cabinets, to junk food cabinets. When wheels chuffed gravel, we scrambled into the thick woods, our hearts cartwheeling in our chests.

#

By noon it was baking, so we abandoned our search for the goats, thumbed our way to the beach then stripped down to our underwear. Leftover swells socked the shore but the sun glared yellow and on striped towels we tanned. Bare-chested surfers bobbed on the undulating black and blue and the remains of Irene fell apart over open ocean. That summer, we thought the gale winds were the worst that would happen.

#

We woke the next morning to the low drone of plane engines, fog pooling across lawns. Our mothers and fathers sat saucer-eyed before televisions, stony newscasters reporting a vanished

single engine carrying a family from Boston to Hyannis Port. Cameras rolled footage of black-suited divers bobbing, then disappearing, into the curls of lingering waves.

#

Under the sun-sick sky, we marched farther into the green woods at Great Rock. The metal wings of low-flying planes spat reflected light and we shaded our eyes from the glare. We chewed flattened tuna sandwiches, tossed the crusts into the damp brush. We were silent as we rested, backs pressed to the warm granite of a pocked boulder.

#

We read newspapers for the first time, trading titles under the beams of the treehouse. From the Boston Globe, we learned the names and ages of the passengers, that the daughter, a few years older than us, had just started school at Boston University. The New York Times informed us that the family had been heading to their summer home for a vacation. The Washington Post's headlines were the most dire: FAMILY OF THREE PRESUMED DEAD IN SMALL CRAFT MISHAP. And even though Leslie agreed, had announced that they were dead, fucking dead, actually, we couldn't stop turning pages.

#

After exhausting the newspapers, we turned to televisions. Our mothers exiled us from houses, backpacks of trail mix, bottled water. "Get outside," they said. "Get some fresh air." They worried that we had been watching too much TV. They noted that we roamed from house to house, sat cross legged in front of blinking screens, flipping through the cycles of news channels, ears pricking. Expelled from houses, our pupils bloomed and seared in the sun.

#

Even though we felt queasy at the idea, we still clipped pictures of the lost girl from front pages and lit the nubs of scented candles under the roof of the Maple Mansion. We fingertipped the planchette of the Ouija board, closed our eyes and hummed, recited a chant we found on the Web. By name, we called to the girl, asked her to make her presence known. Our pulses quickened but under our fingers the plastic triangle was glued to the board and after five minutes we gave up, released breaths we hadn't known we were holding.

#

We found the dented body of a plane in the woods near Great Rock. We picked our way towards the pond, swatted mosquitos, planned on wading into the cool darkness. Across the pulsing surface, we saw the foreign shape. Wheels in the air, nose accordioned—without wings, we noted, it looked like a butter dish. The wind had quieted and the pond's surface was glass and swarms of gnats rose from trampled grass. We stood and stared and when Leslie moved closer, Dee touched her shoulder. Shook her head. We hoofed it back to the sandy path, kicked up clouds of dust, ran until the woods were behind us and stuck our thumbs out, our feet grounded on asphalt.

#

That same day, we heard Leslie's younger brother found the goats. They had nosed into a secluded summer house and spent the week sleeping and shitting in sleigh beds, gleefully chomping their way through first editions and abstract paintings. Had we been together, we would have laughed at the idea of the square-toothed billies shredding Milton, but by that time we were already moving in different directions and although we'd spend a few nights in the treehouse and swill wine coolers, we never talked about that day in the woods. What we had

shared was too much for us to shoulder and so we let it drop. By the next fall, we'd wave and smile and partner in biology, but we found other friends, other paths to wander.

#

If you ask someone about that summer, they'll probably remember Irene. I still hike out to the knoll where we found the wing, watch the wind ruffle the water on the pond and the goose-necked aningas bob, then disappear, under sloping waves. Tall grasses have covered the deer paths we used to walk and the leaves of trees grow thicker every season, but, if you're ever on the island, I'll show you the way.

LEARNING TO BREATHE UNDERWATER

June is already a liability. Last call for three dollar zucchinis at the farmers market, and suddenly everyone is on island time. Rent a windowless basement for nine hundred a month and lose a paycheck to organic canned goods at the grocery. I lose my boyfriend to a brunette from Connecticut.

#

The Island Gold Rush is a term I learned from my mother. During the summer, when your boyfriend disappears in the passenger seat of a rented BMW know he will be back by September. When I tell my friend Nina that Dave has joined the 49ers, she pours me a vodka. “Come on,” she jokes. “You know it’s not going to pan out.”

#

First, I lose my boyfriend. Then, I lose my job at the bank. Then, I lose my mind and apply for a job at the Majestic Mermaid.

#

My interview went like this: cup size, waist size, hip size? Swimmer? Animal lover? Team player? Crowd pleaser? Over eager? Hired.

#

The Majestic Mermaid started in Florida, Marv, the gold toothed manager, tells me as we walk the grounds, but he took the show on the road three years ago. Marv’s office is a water stained trailer. The dressing room a four sleeper tent. A Styrofoam shell-flanked path Hansels and Gretels guests from the fin-shaped gates to the sunken amphitheater. Under the shade of a silk-

leaved awning, Water Striders Christ-walk on the still surface of a glass-fronted above-ground pool. When I ask Marv what's in the back tank, he shrugs, says just another bad investment. In the trailer, I waive liability and sign up for direct deposit, paw through promotional literature. From the new employee handbook, I learn the lingo. Getting tailed is when a mermaid earns her fins. Swimming with the fishes is code for early retirement. A landlubber is a guest at the show. Fresh bait, as it turns out, is *me*.

#

The *Island Queen* is a boat that ferries tourists to the island and also a nickname for my friend, Nina, a sixth generation islander. She hosts solstice séances in a fall-down shack on the curved shore of Squibnocket Pond with other island women. We drink mulled wine from mason jars while Nina drives the triangle of the Ouija board. In the pulsing light of the burning candles, our shadows are women, are gods, are horned, and we join hands and laugh as Nina summons the ghosts of boyfriends past.

#

As cars pass, I bask on a plastic rock outside the fin shaped entrance to the Majestic Mermaid and flip my fabric tail for tourists cruising State Road. I am met with whistles, middle fingers, the occasional soda can. As the new mermaid in town, I am on a three week probationary period. The other girls are seasoned swimmers, have been tailed since Florida. They are Kristy, Candy, Tory, and Mandy. I call them the *Ys*. In the brochure, their glamour shots include fun facts: Kristy's favorite food is pizza, Candy's diehard celebrity crush Harrison Ford. If she weren't a mermaid, Tory would be a nurse or a vet. Mandy dreams of being a mother. When I tell my mother about my new job, she laughs. "Isn't that fintastic?"

#

Break time is the Ys lipping menthol cigarettes behind a giant scallop shell in bikini bottoms. Between drags, they coach me through the underwater routines. I shake my fabric tail to an updated version of the Macarena called the Seaside Sizzler, bird wing my way through the Chicken (of the Sea) Dance. When cigarettes are stubbed and mouths waterproof lipsticked, the Ys sling tails over shoulders and head to the plastic grotto. I mist sunscreen on my face and shoulders, recline fetchingly on the plastic rock.

#

On nights when I can't sleep, I pull on my swimsuit and hiking boots and follow the matted deer paths to a shuttered summer home. The water in the infinity pool is cold and deep, and I hold my breath until my ears pound and my lungs shudder. I practice the choreographed turns and dips the Ys showed me, keep my ankles crossed, let my arms pull me through the slick darkness. In the trees, invisible frogs warble bass calls.

#

On my state mandated fifteen minute breaks, I turn down the Ys offers of mentholated cigarettes and head to the back tank where the bad investment is housed. The money sucker is a skittish dolphin named Flipper rescued from a sorry attempt at a seaside Sea World. He floats in the corner of the giant, glass-fronted pool, refusing fish and rolling from human touch. His ribs press through his skin. He shrills as the sun sets, a sharp, piercing whistle that sounds like a distant train but also like a warning. I try to coax him towards me with open palms. One day, I bring him the scaled body of a just-caught flounder. He ignores the fish, sinks deeper into the water.

#

I met Nina when I moved to the island after college. My parents, Massachusetts natives, rented a summer home in West Tisbury most years until they gave up on New England winters and hightailed it to Florida. Nina was the only bank teller who kept her job when the rest of us were cut loose due to downsizing. We split beers on lunch breaks and, eventually, she introduced me to other locals, women who had known each other since childhood. Their beers were priced lower than mine, their grocery bags free. Even though I've lived on this island for five years, I still hand over quarters for my chicken breasts and oven cleaner to be paper bagged.

#

The Majestic Mermaid is closed on Sundays, and I've promised the *Ys* a trip to a locals only beach. In Candy's minivan, we turn up the radio and sing along with the pop songs broadcast from the mainland. It's early and the beach is quiet, small waves tongue the rock-pitted shore and we drink light beers from Candy's cooler. The *Ys* ask a lot of whys about the island. Why are the cliffs red? And why don't you have any chain stores? And why don't I have a boyfriend? When I tell them about Dave, they wonder aloud why I was ever with him. I wonder why, too, and in that moment realize that he was just another distraction from a slow-melting winter. Back in the van, we are sunburned shoulders and just-bloomed freckles, and, on the drive, I point to the nests of ospreys, the brick of the all-island high school, the hidden driveways of celebrity homes.

#

The bleach in the dye kit sears my skull, and I grit my teeth as Nina massages the paste into my scalp. Two weeks of nights in the chlorined pool at the summer house has tinged my hair green. While the dye sets, Nina sits on my front step, reads sections from the Majestic Mermaid roll call. "When you get tailed," she asks, "do you get a new name?" She improvises my fun facts

list. What advice would I give to anyone who wants to be a majestic mermaid? Get fired. Be desperate. My biggest accomplishment? Fellating a banana underwater. “These girls”, she says, paging through the photos, “are astoundingly dumb.” “Astounding,” I echo.

#

Dave drives by with his new girl on an overcast Tuesday, and it’s too late for me to duck. I was wrong. It is not a BMW. It is a Mercedes SUV and, as soon as they are around the bend, I hop as fast as I can to the break room, tell the Ys that I cannot possibly finish my shift. Kristy trades me her cutoffs for my sequined fin. The reasonable thing, I think, as I squeeze into her shorts, is to go back to the front gates, but the reasonable things are always the hardest.

#

The Ys live in a rented house in town paid for by the owners of the Majestic Mermaid. Everything is beach kitsch. A conch phone mounted on the wall, lamp bases filled with shells. On the mantle, a sign reads ME AND MY OLD CRAB LIVE HERE I sit on a fish print couch and drink white wine. I pick at the splitting ends of my new platinum hair. Candy suggests ketchup next time to keep the chorine out. No, Tory counters, it’s vinegar. They look to Kristy. She shrugs, says she always uses lemon juice to draw out the green. Just make sure to get your hair wet before you go in, Mandy adds. This they all agree on. In their mini dresses and stacked heels, the Ys are ready to hit Circuit Ave and although it’s been years since I have gone out to the tourist bars, in their tan-legged company I cannot help but catch their excitement.

#

The same week I am scheduled to get tailed, we hear that Flipper is going to be a great surprise addition to the show. The Ys roll their eyes. Last season, Mandy tells me, the great surprise was a

merman from Hollywood, Florida, who was so into method acting that he had to be air-lifted to Orlando after nearly drowning in a rip tide. He was fine, the Ys assure me, but they'd assumed Marv had learned his lesson about great surprises.

#

Nina refuses to come to see me get tailed. This, she says, holding up the mermaid shaped invitation Candy made, is fucking ridiculous. She argues that the Majestic Mermaid show shouldn't even be on the island. That they're grubbing money from local business and that the Ys are no better than that girl from Connecticut who snaked my boyfriend. She says that, perhaps, I would understand this better if I weren't a summer person myself. That night, as I walk the deer paths, I lose my way, turn left when I should've forked right. In the openness of an unfamiliar clearing, I think maybe Nina was right, maybe these paths were never mine to walk. I retrace my steps, correct my mistake. In the darkened pool, I float on my back, watch the stars come unpinned, the sounds of the trees and the birds and the wind silenced by the black water.

#

I meet the Ys at the front gate. We cut the headlights, grab hands. In the moonless sky, the stars burn, the red dots of distant planes drift. Without spotlights, the grotto is black, the peeping of frogs and the sighing of leaves shrill in the still darkness. The Ys lead me to the edge of the pool, instruct me to lie back against the side. My hair dips into the water, and Mandy douses the rest of my scalp with a prop conch shell. Overhead, clouds drift, stars burn. I imagine their reflection in the dark water, reverse constellations wheeling across the black surface. A match snaps then hisses to flame. The Ys hold candles and Tory comes toward me with a purple tail. I shed my skirt, slide into the thick putty. The Ys hand me into the tank, joining me silently in the night

cooled water. Flipper starts whistling, his high keens rising as his bottled nose breaks the surface. Candy starts, adding her voice to his and then we all join his mournful wail. I think of Tory's dream life as a vet, rebuilding the broken hearts of abandoned animals. I think of the children Mandy doesn't have the time or money to have. I think of Kristy swallowing pizza after pizza until she can no longer slink into her tail. I think of our lives, wheeling down opposite paths, moving against the constellations pinned above us. Flipper weaves towards us, water lapping. Tory places her hands on his sides and then Mandy and Candy and Kristy and I come closer, fuse our palms to his slick skin. Flipper quiets then. Under the warm press of our palms, we can feel his heart tick and our own pulses slow, sinking into rhythm with the dolphin, with the water, with the hum of unseeable insects, with the tides, the moon, the penduluming satellites forever watching above us.

#

Labor Day is prime parking and open availability for that cut you've needed all summer. Blunted bob swinging, I find Dave hangdogging on my front porch next to the serrated leaves of basil. He asks me if I'm going somewhere, points to my boxed up living room. Forgiving him is the reasonable thing, but the reasonable thing is always the hardest.

#

Eating a banana underwater is easier than you might imagine. Large bites are best. Drinking orange Fanta is harder, a Mars bar the absolute pits. Comparatively, learning to breathe underwater is a breeze. I've been breathing underwater since June.

HOME OF HOMES

In the year without a summer, a Toyota Camry cracks through the iced surface of Quonset Pond. I read the article in the Martha's Vineyard Gazette, learn that the driver swung out his window and sat on the roof, braying for help until help came. I drive to the edge of the pond, sit in my fogged car. Ice reforms around the gray sedan, the water underneath pulsing sluggishly. It will be another month before the surface is thick enough for a crane to come through, another month before the ice will crack, the car pulled to the deep bottom where fish will fin by, where barnacles will pimple rusting metal. Another month before a decision will be made.

#

NOT FOR SALE scrawled in thick, black paint on a piece of plywood leaning where a door belonged. Broken windows and wood splintering from inside onto green lawn while the pink dust of bricks ran brown. Most afternoons, heavy rain came, turning sky to pavement and pavement to sky as the leaves of trees grew green and fat and roots swelled underground, nudging at concrete. In widening cracks, oaks grew.

#

Aaron and I had been talking about buying the white brick house on Fairfield Street in the University District of Detroit for six months. Or maybe I had been talking and he had been nodding. *Crown molding* and *original tiling* and *built-in cabinets*. Detroit was a place I'd seen on the news, a city said to be destroyed—the opposite of the small town in which Aaron and I had been raised and I'd had more than enough of that familiar place. Under tangled sheets, I nagged

him about calling the realtor, submitting an offer. He'd laugh, trace the ridges of my spine.

"Can't you just be happy here?"

#

The first few weeks in the foreign house on Fairfield Street were spent double checking locks and windows. I cringed with every car alarm and listened for sirens that never came. At night, I dreamt of snow falling in blinding sheets and, when I woke, I was surprised to find green grass and the creep of ivy. In a hip coffee shop, French Presses sighed and indie music blared as boys in beanies discussed their LPs. They talked of banging rocks together on an underlying loop of a track, and in their words I found easy comfort. I had overheard this conversation in coffeeshops on the island. Outside, a man wearing a pair of red leopard print jeans smoked the butts of cigarettes recovered from the lips of Corktown hipsters.

#

A podiatry student answered an ad I placed online, renting the room down the hall, and, suddenly, things were less lonely. *Did you know there are twenty-six bones in the human foot? By the time they die, most people will have taken enough steps to circle the globe four times without ever leaving their hometowns.* After work, he told me of patients with gunshot feet, bullets spiraling through miniscule bone and shredding callouses. Under the fluorescent lights of the operating table, he played music from ballets, the chords of Tchaikovsky and Moretti drifting through hidden speakers. I remembered stories of surgeons singing along with Janis Joplin while slicing through the membranes of filmy hearts.

#

Aaron and I started dating in high school hallways, splitting Thanksgivings between our parents' homes before we were old enough to vote. At parties and in the bed of Aaron's pickup, we sipped warm PBRs and listened to the Boss pick out vibrating chords on an invisible guitar. Aaron would close his eyes and sing along to *My Hometown*, and I knew he was seeing cobblestoned Main Street and the cement back of Brickman's Sporting Goods where he had ringed our initials with an imperfect heart. More than once, I wished he would listen hard enough to hear the sorrow behind those easy words.

#

On sides of Golden Age highways, the speed limit was marked at 70. Cars passed in either lane, and under my four tires the asphalt was turning to dust. No working stoplights meant no stopping, and the grass on the side of the road was tall enough that a man could hide—tall enough that a child could be lost. As spring spooled forward, soccer balls blurred black and white across the lush green of forgotten parking lots.

#

Overnight, a man ate the devil and was proud, so he scrawled those words on the brick side of our neighborhood liquor store. Other buildings carry similar messages: *Gremlins. Purgers. Narc Remorse. Sorry Ideals*. I wondered what it would feel like to spray strong words against the white-washed walls of my hometown.

#

My girlfriends used to ask when Aaron and I were going to tie the knot, settle down, get hitched. After high school, after twin degrees from Rutgers, after summers spent on the planked, sand-riddled boardwalks of the island's shore, I knew nothing bad would ever happen between the two

of us. One late summer day, when sand burned too hot, Aaron and I visited a jewel-turbaned woman who traded our future for ten dollars. In the branching lines of my hand, she promised wealth and happiness and a manicured lawn. Aaron smiled, took her words as truth. I felt uneasy, pinned by her prediction. Later, I would see the same woman watering browning grass in denim cutoffs and a tank top and know that she was just another false prophet.

#

I called the concrete circle out back a sunken garden. Weeds sprawled from the center, green blades slicing against concrete. The woman next door told me koi used to swim here, unlidded eyes wide as mouths gaped. In the light of the sun, thick orange scales flashed, fleeting spots of light skittering over green-veined leaves. Sinewy roots cracked and crumbled like tiny bones as I ripped tendrils from red-brown earth.

#

In the window of Flowers on Livernois & Davidson, cross-shaped bouquets stood tall on wooden stakes. Mother's day fell in two weeks, and still the flowering arms of crosses bloomed toward the four corners of the earth. Next door, black and gold sandwich boards advertised discounted funeral packages.

#

May on the vineyard brought rolling heat blackouts. Dark nights with stars dimmed by Boston's haze. Windows lit by candles, lethargic breeze nudging the browning grass of manicured lawns and arguments staged under flickering halos of flashlights. Beneath the light of a half born moon, Aaron told me there was nothing for us in Detroit—we could save more money, buy a house in town, bury our roots deep in the island's sandy soil.

#

At a coffee shop, I met a long-limbed poet named Fluent. When he read, he was in motion—his hands over his heart, above his head, resting on slim hips. His voice came from somewhere deeper than his throat, and, when he spoke of his city, the brick of abandoned buildings glowed pink in the wash of his words.

#

During the first week of July, flowers blossomed in the night. In the koi pond, I was surprised to find the purple petals of Asters trembling in the wind beside Foxglove's white, velvet bells. The air was charcoal and car exhaust and under the cover of darkness, vines reshaped the empty windows of left-behind homes.

#

Aaron laughed when I told him I would go by myself. He asked: "Who would fix the broken things?"

#

On Sundays, Eastern Market was an ankle-deep sea of hydrangeas and peonies and violets. Shoppers from Detroit suburbs handed over smudged twenties for better homes and multi-colored lawns. I bought plants with strange names: Succulents and Hooded Skullcap and Mother's in Law Cushion. Back at Fairfield Street, I turned over dark brown soil and dared foreign seeds to take root.

#

On a humid Wednesday night, Fluent took me to a party at an artist's loft downtown. Towering, unlit buildings submerged entire blocks in darkness as unyielding spires clawed at blackened

sky. Inside, high ceilings and the press of bodies and Motown records shuddering on the needle of a turntable. Fluent told me that his father used to come here years ago, would drink ice-slushed Labatts and listen to the same records. Through an open window, I watched as children lit fireworks that sizzled against damp pavement before spiraling into the sky and exploding in showers of white brighter than the light of any star.

#

While I packed, Aaron watched television. Wheels of game shows and weeks' worth of news hours and the life-ending affairs of telenovelas. As Drew Carey thrust microphones at eager contestants, Aaron shouted out astronomical figures for household items. Three grand for the microwave! and a hundred dollars for the teeth whitening strips! When the actual prices flashed yellow against blackened screens, Aaron sighed. "At this rate, I'll never win a brand-new life."

#

Canada was closer than I imagined. At night, I walked the dimly lit pavement of Riverside Park, breathing in the fresh scent of the swirling water. Across the bridge, casino lights shine purple, red, blue. Young couples stumbled hand in hand, sprung from the bars of Windsor where the drinking age is nineteen. Dark currents buck and purl, hiding the rusted-out frames of cars and the bones of milk carton kids. When the wind blew from the north, I heard the words of bridge walkers: "Almost home, almost home."

#

The podiatrist and I took a day trip to Lake Huron, where the suburbs are strip malls and discount clothing stores and familiar supermarket chains. He was glad to get out of town, to forget the fall-down buildings and the *Fuck Fargo* signs yellowing in windows. I cruised through

two red lights without stopping. The beach was edged by short, fat-needled trees, arched roots exposed. Beneath my bare feet, the sand was coarse and pebbled and unfamiliar, and the surface of the lake stretched flat, its slow pulse brushing the shores of two nations.

#

“You’ll be back,” Aaron said through the rolled-down window. In the rearview mirror, Aaron grew smaller. I made the ten-hour drive in a day. Along the side of the road, green hills rose and fell in quick breaths and wild flowers popped bright in tangles of grass. The bells of Bluebonnets rang out in silence.

#

At the Detroit Institute of the Arts, I saw paintings that have never been on tour. Monets and Van Goghs and Dalis hung unprotected on white walls while lone visitors wandered through arched hallways. In the classics collection, I touched the unmarred surface of a marble face crafted by long-forgotten fingers. In the line of the cheek bones, the tilt of the nose, the fullness of lips, I found my own features. Overhead, the light shifted, colors falling through stained glass windows as, outside, the sun moved through a cloudless sky. My fingers brushed the smooth marble of empty eyes.

#

Downtown on game day was blue and white Tigers t-shirts and melting ice cream cones. Fluent and I were swept along by the crowd heading to the stadium. Scalpers waved tickets. By the front gates, a man in a lion costume gestured with oversized, plush paws. On the bleachers, Fluent and I sipped summer shandies and ate overcooked hot dogs as bats swung and the red

stitching on fastballs unraveled. The crowd was loud and the grass emerald and even though the Tigers were losing, the stadium hummed with the chant of last names.

#

Fluent's key still worked at the old Music Hall that John Dodge's wife commissioned in the twenties, and he pointed to the door of his office as we wandered down dusted hallways. In the theatre, the seats were red velvet. Textured frescoes lined the ceiling. I climbed the steps to the stage and stood pigeon-toed on a white X. Fluent told me to take two steps to the right, that Etta James stood on that very spot, her voice reaching into the darkened pockets of the auditorium. When I spoke, the acoustics transformed my voice. My words returned to my ears like a stranger's.

#

On Tuesdays, I called Aaron and we talked until he said he had to go. He told me about the flooded laundry room—the way the washer released gallons of soapy water onto the linoleum while he was at work. He was sure there would be lasting damage. He mentioned Ryan, Timmy, John—men we had known since boyhood—and the nights they passed at Barnacle Bill's drinking two-dollar drafts and dropping empty peanut shells to the ground. He said his mother missed me.

#

The podiatrist whistled John Coltrane as he folded sweaters and stacked textbooks. He was off to a new place for another three-month stint. He was happy to be leaving Motor City. Despite knowing the answer, I asked him if he plans on ever returning. He crossed his middle and pointer finger, held them aloft. Hoped for luck to keep him far away. I watched from the kitchen window

as his sedan pulled out of the driveway. The white of his fresh-pressed lab coat flashed from the back window.

#

Fluent was falling in love with me. It wasn't something he said, but I heard it anyway—hidden in the verses written on the back of receipts from the Music Hall and on perfect squares of cocktail napkins from Baker's. Lamenting rhymes schemed in ABAB longing to be himself, but somewhere else. I slipped these words between bills and flyers and recycled them weekly. At night, when the hymns of car alarms sounded, those lines took root in my mind, falling in rhythm with automatic cries as Aaron's words bloomed thick in my mouth: "Why can't you be happy here?"

#

Here on the island, spring is coming. Ice runs to water, branches flex, freed from weighted snow. Crocuses and the yellow heads of over-eager dandelions nudge at the snow. Aaron and I slush through browned grass to the shore of Quonset Pond. Patches of ice purl across the slick surface. The metal frame of the car has joined the other forgotten things at the sanded bottom of the pond. The caged ribs of dogs, the hooks of fishing lines, a sneaker. In the end, the water will reshape them all, creating an alien world beneath the surface. Maybe one day a diver will slip on a mask, breach the surface, pass through the windows of the one-time Camry, and mistake it for a bridge to another world.

OUT HERE

Two weeks had passed since you returned to your hometown. You had left Austin hurriedly, your favorite navy pearl snap, the one that made your blue eyes pop, lay forgotten on my bedroom floor. I folded the shirt in my weekend bag along with other things of yours that I found strewn around my apartment: winter felt hat, power drill, half full cans of Copenhagen fine cut chewing tobacco, your grandfather's old flight jacket.

I drove to Harper, Texas, population now nine hundred and ninety three, on a Saturday morning. It was early as I left the sleeping city of Austin, sidewalks empty, cafe tables and chairs tucked inside restaurants, the sun making its slow climb in the sky as I pulled onto route ten. In the side view mirror, the green-tinged skyline pointed accusingly at me before disappearing into the sweep of the hills.

I was flying over the highway, the windows down, my car curling and twisting with the yellow lines. It had rained the night before, the first time in months, and the earth smelled alive again. Wildflowers on either side of the road standing at attention, flashes of red of gold of white, and I was taking the smell of them in with long deep breaths, their scent filling my chest. The hills rose and fell in long brush strokes and overhead the sky was blue and close and huge and I was happy you weren't beside me.

Five miles outside of Johnson City, I punched my foot to the break, tires screeching in protest against the damp asphalt. I sat for a moment, white-knuckled the wheel. She stared at me unblinkingly, her eyes large and brown, standing in the middle of the road, her shadow a rectangle. I stepped out of the car and moved towards her. She switched her tail twice and her

entire flank danced as the wind blew, the bells of the blue bonnets on the side of the road swaying.

I approached her with my hand out, palm turned up. She blinked twice, eyelids falling slowly. She dropped her black snout into my open hand, her breath hot and thick and tangible.

“Sweet girl,” I murmured and moved my hands to either side of her neck.

She stared at me, eyes heavy with black lashes. She swayed her head to the right, her coarse coat prickly beneath my palms, her udder pink and full. The warm wind cut across the highway and I could smell her; the mix of grass, of dirt, of manure. Her ears flicked back and I dropped my hands to my sides. She began to move, her thick body carried on spindly legs, the sound of her hooves heavy against the asphalt. I watched her as she turned her back to me, her gait slow and measured. At the edge of the road, she looked over her shoulder, light pooling in the center of her close-set eyes.

A horn sounded, loud and close. Behind my parked car a man in a pickup truck was leaning halfway out his rolled down window, waving his cowboy hat, mouth curled in the shape of an O. Move, maybe, or go, or perhaps fuck you.

When I turned back she was gone, her shadow erased from the asphalt . I breathed in, chest expanding quickly, nose twitching for the scent of her, but all I could smell were the flowers and the air and the exhaust from the truck.

Back in the car, I thought of her still, the way I had held her breath in my hand. She stayed with me for the rest of the drive, an invisible passenger, the two of us traipsing down long, curving stretches of highway.

I arrived at your mother's house around nine, the sun climbing in the sky, sucking the moisture from the earth. Already the grass had started to wilt again, flowers bowing at stems. I pulled into the driveway, my tires rattling over the cattle guard. In the middle of the yard, a skeletal windmill turned lazily, sunlight glinting off metal arms.

I parked behind your powder blue pickup and the dogs started howling. I heard your voice before I saw you making your way off the screened in porch, Coors Original in hand. Your tee shirt stained with black grease from hours spent under your truck, Wranglers old and threadbare, left knee popping through.

"Hey, baby," you called as you came towards me, your steps off kilter, and I wondered exactly how many Cowboy Koolaid's you'd had that morning.

I pretended not to hear you, opening my trunk and slinging the strap of my bag over my shoulder. You came towards me, aiming for a kiss, but I brushed you off, pointing from the grease stains to my white linen dress. You pouted, bottom lip drooping towards your chin and I smiled tightly at you as we walked up the wheelchair ramp to your mother's front door.

Inside the house, your mother was asleep in her La-Z boy recliner, her breathing slow and labored. Her rose printed nightgown had slipped down from her left shoulder, exposing the catheter that was attached to her bony chest with clear surgical tape. Her collarbone stood out, creating a deep hollow in her shoulder. On the muted television, the weather channel played a special on tornadoes, massive gray funnels danced across the screen, sucking up ranch style houses, brand new cars, the rectangular shadows of lost cows.

#

Do you remember the night we met at the dance hall? The red building huddled on the east side of South Lamar, neon lights flooding in waves to the outer reaches of the parking lot. It had only been a month since I had moved to Austin from the island, the city and the land and the people still alien to me.

I had been hesitant to come to the bar that night, unsure of myself in shiny new boots. My co-worker, Emily, convinced me to meet her, but I could feel my heart thumping against my chest as I pushed through the saloon doors.

The bar was dark, a haze of smoke absorbing the light, hanging overhead like halos come undone. The stench of cheap beer and sweat and perfume in the air and the whirl of massive window units humming over the noise from the band. The players on stage were old men with old hands and old dreams, their instruments crying out into the darkness. On the varnished wood dance floor, couples moved to the music, the sound of the stacked heels of boots falling a second too late. Emily and I sat at a tall table in the corner, sipping Lone Star beers and watching wide-eyed as the unfamiliar song came to a noisy end.

It was then that you long-legged over and asked me to dance. I smiled at you, shaking my head as I took in your tight Wrangler jeans and dark blue shirt, the pearly buttons shimmering in the light. I asked you if that line ever worked for you and you shrugged, a smile hitching up the left side of your face. You asked me again and I said no, telling you I couldn't. I had just moved here from Connecticut and had never two-stepped before—the the first lie I ever told you.

So you pulled a stool up, sat hip to hip, knee to knee with me. You asked me about my life on the island, listening as I told you about my small town, small college, small life. I came to Texas because I could, to take a year to be somewhere else before I spent the next four pent up in

a law school library. I told you about the schools I had already applied to, tracing the outline of the United States on the table, marking possibilities with balled up pieces of paper.

You, in turn, pressed your lips to my ear and told me tales of unsung Texas heroes, of broken bones, of rodeos. I listened because the twang in your voice sounded like a different language, the thread of a strange dream, all long Os and sharp As.

You spread your hands out before me, your long calloused fingers resting against the table. You took my finger and followed the lines of the scars that littered your hands. A thick welt across your right palm from when you were a boy learning to lasso sheep in pasture, the rope slithering away from you like a burning snake. A crescent scar at the bottom of your palm, the rodeo accident where you flew twenty feet in the air, the silence of the crowd catching you as you fell, bones bent at unnatural angles, spur lancing through the flesh of your hand.

Emily had left long ago, but you and I stayed, sharing stories until the lights brightened, the bartenders shouting out last call. You pulled me to the dance floor, hand wrapping around my waist as the band launched into their final song. Around us, people cheered, flooding towards the glistening wood and we were swept into a sea of teased hair and straw cowboy hats. I moved with you, letting your hands and movements guide me. I kept my eyes closed as we circled the floor, the full skirt of my red dress spinning out like a pinwheel.

Later when you walked me to my car I let you kiss me in the parking lot, your breath tinged with the peppery taste of chewing tobacco, the smell of cut grass drifting from your body.

“Goodnight, Yankee girl,” you said to me and as you gently closed my car door and in that moment I thought that I could never hate you.

Over the next eight months, we would return to that place on Wednesdays and Saturdays, the bartenders learning our names, my feet falling seamlessly in sync with yours. After too many shared beers, you would talk about our lives together, the way our stories would twist and meld to make one; decisions made over dollar beers. I would go to law school at the University of Texas, pass the bar, set up a practice in a tiny town. You would continue to cowboy, riding fast over rolling green hills, chasing the ever setting sun until you could return home to me.

#

Your brother Jake had been tending grill all day, gulping beers, wiping his sweating forehead with the hem of his Rodeo Austin t-shirt, hairy belly spilling over his jeans. Your mother told me that when the two of you were boys she couldn't tell you apart, Irish twins, at least one always in trouble. When I studied Jake closely I could see you in the shape of his nose, the curve of his smile. There was something mean in his eyes, though, that would flicker occasionally, a darker twin darting across his blue irises.

In the kitchen, your mother and I washed dishes, her blue-veined hands slow moving in soapy water, tongue worrying at her one remaining tooth. She told me she was happy to have you home to help her out; things had been hard since your father died two years ago. It was nice for her to have a man around again. She blamed your father's absence for the massive stroke she suffered when she was out collecting eggs one morning, as if the lack of his presence caused her brain to forget how to breathe.

On that early morning, she fell to the ground, the left side of her body crumpling. She lay in the dirt as the sun burned the sky orange, the morning songs of birds rising overhead. She

thought that she would lay there forever, body slowly seeping into the earth, grass rising up around her, taking root in her mouth, nose, eyes, ears.

I was irritated with her suddenly, frustrated by the sense of need that hung around her hunched shoulders. I led her outside anyway, her steps slow and plodding as she clung to my elbow.

The four of us sat at the wrought iron outdoor table, eating ribs and brisket and store bought coleslaw. Your brother cracked the ribs with his teeth, sucking the marrow from bones, barbeque sauce smearing outside the lines of his thick lips. As we chewed the sun began her slow decline in the sky, rays of pink thrown across the horizon.

After putting your mother went to bed, you, Jake, and I sat on the folded down bed of his truck, drinking beers, throwing the empty cans on the ground where they glistened like hastily buried landmines. I was quiet, letting the two of you talk about the impending deer hunting season, the Houston Texans, the dappled mare your neighbor just bought. I thought about the letters tucked in the bottom of my bag, their creamy envelopes with embossed seals.

As you went inside to grab another six pack from the fridge, your brother slipped his meaty arm around my shoulders, fingers toying with the zipper on my dress. I shrugged out of the embrace, his arm falling back to his side. I could smell the beer on his breath, the hint of barbecue sauce. I heard the door slam, could see your figure moving across the dark yard. Your brother moved his hand to the small of my back, palm sliding, fingers grasping firmly around my ass.

I yelped, jolted forward, my feet hitting the ground.

You were in front of us all of a sudden, the whites of your eyes shining. Your fist collided with Jake's jaw, knocking him back into the bed of the truck. You turned on your heel and strode away into the dark, your brother's laughter following you like a shadow.

#

We lay on the hood of a ruined Ford F-100 in your father's old junkyard, the metal below us still warm even though there were stars overhead. Around us, the skeletons of ruined cars rested in the overgrown grass, vines snaking through missing windows, wrapping around rotting steering wheels.

You lay back, placed your hat on your knee. As you sighed, it seemed that the truck moved with you, settling deeper into the earth.

"What is this place?" I asked, pulling my knees to my chest.

"Somewhere everyone else forgot," you said, staring up at the stars. "Jake and I used to come out here as kids and hoot and holler just to hear the echo."

"Before he was an asshole?"

"He was always an asshole."

You pointed up at the crescent moon as a cloud slowly moved across its surface. God's toenail, you called it. I rolled my eyes.

"If He had a toenail it would look like that."

I pointed to the big dipper, tracing the shape of a ladle against the sky. Around us, the high grass danced as the wind blew, the smell of earth and rust and decay rising around us. You pointed out the constellations you had named when you were a boy, when you and your brother would come to this place with filched beers stuffed in the sleeves of your shirts. Pepper, the

retired rodeo horse who bucks forever in the arena in the stars, the big and little lasso spinning through the universe in opposite directions. Nearby an owl screeched.

I gave you one last chance as we lay on that truck surrounded by the crumbling vehicles, telling you that I didn't get into the University of Texas, had received the thin letter in the mail right after you left Austin. You didn't say anything about the letters I had found tucked in the sleeve of your cracking leather jacket, though, just rolled towards me, and stamped a kiss on my forehead. I could feel anger rising inside me, hot and quick, racing from stomach to throat. I swallowed it, laying down beside you.

You told me you had been coming out here nearly every night since you had returned to Harper, cutting through the tall grass in the inky blackness, the tread of your boots whittling a path. You said you felt safe surrounded by the corroding metal, the smell of the earth erasing the scent of your mother's pills and bandages.

We lay in silence, the clouds drifting overhead, surfaces darkening as they moved farther away from the moon.

Eventually, you slid down from the truck, the pocket of your Wranglers catching on the crumbling grill. You held out a hand to me, but I shook my head and jumped, my dress floating as I moved through the air. We picked our way across the field that backed up to your mother's house, stepping over pieces of tire and wood and old beer cans.

Ahead, a single light bulb shone from your mother's back porch, illuminating the wood slatted swing your grandfather built, his initials carved into the armrest. I looked behind me once, taking in the ruined frames of the disintegrating cars, before they disappeared into the woods, knowing, at that moment, that I would never see their shadows again.

In the house we brushed our teeth in silence in the bathroom and in the dirty mirror I stared at your face, memorizing the dimple in your chin, the line of your jaw. Your mother's plastic shower chair stood like a stranger behind us.

#

The next morning you left before the sun was up to take your mother to dialysis in Kerrville. I woke disoriented in your childhood bedroom, football trophies and rodeo buckles winking at me in the early morning light. On the wall, a bikini clad Rebecca Romijn watched over the room with pursed lips.

On the front porch I slipped into my running sneakers, tight knots in the yellow laces. The sky was metal gray, clouds hovering like vultures

I started slowly down the long driveway, gravel digging into the soft soles of my shoes, picking up speed as I neared the high school, pink bricks dull against the gray sky. I cut across the parking lot and onto the football field, the place you used to play on Friday nights, the lights blinding overhead, the entire town in the bleachers screaming your name.

My pulse pounding against my throat, ponytail flying behind me, lungs taking in the thick air in bursts. I hurdled over the low concrete barrier that separated the school from the town cemetery, ancient tombstones surrounding me, tops adorned with crosses, with angels, with crowns. Tiny sprinkles of rain began to fall, the clouds opening like a curtain. I wove through the rows of weathered stones searching for your last name, my feet sliding as the rain began to press down with more urgency. The rain fell in sheets, hair weighing heavy against my back. Your father's grave in front of me, his name the same as yours, letters carved into hard stone. In this

space you will be buried, falling into place beside your ancestors, a fate decided before you were born. Your wife, too, will lay here at your side, sleeping forever in this land of bone and stone.

Water filled my shoes, the hammering of the rain singing in my ears until my thoughts were drowned along with the ground beneath my feet.

Back at your mother's house, I made your bed, pulling the flannel coverlet tight. I placed the four letters in the center, their edges aligned to form one large, perfect rectangle.

On the drive back to Austin, I listened to the mournful songs of Patsy Cline, her voice filling my chest like a second heartbeat. The rain passed, moving on to another town, the sun hastily reclaiming the sky. I moved upwards through green hills, the needle on my speedometer fluttering. Ranches lined the side of the highway, barbed wire strung from posts.

As I flew by the White Horse Ranch, I saw them, their noses buried in the wet earth, eyes staring with longing past the jagged metal. I could feel the weight of their eyes on me as I drove past, the landscape changing from green to brown, gas stations and strip malls looming ahead, dark spots in the blinding sky.

FINAL TAKERS

Before I thought I was going to die, Mark was nosing the Toyota away from the fluorescent o-p-e-n signs of Oak Bluffs. We had dipped from the Ritz to the Lamp Post to the Dive, all empty-stooled, all manned by crease-faced vodka jockeys. We went out looking for something that night. A sympathetic ear. A beer. A hand to hold.

Mark and I were still living together even though we had broken up weeks before. The night we officially called it quits, Mark hightailed it out the front door. Sayonara, he said. See ya later. Bye bye. By the time he returned the next morning, I had exhausted the rental ads and done the math. On our off-season salaries, there was no way we could afford new digs and so we divided the duplex, Mark taking the guestroom and the master bath. I moved my makeup and whitening strips to the half-bath, resigned to shiver through outdoor showers until May rolled around. It wasn't that anything terrible had happened between us—just the slow, growing realization that, despite our two years together, we didn't share much more than a lease.

Winter on island is whiskey and boarded T-shirt shops, bursting pipes and untillable soil. Winter on island is an affair maker, a drink pusher, a sorrow teaser. Winter on island is what sent us scurrying from the house that night, what sent us searching for faces that weren't our own.

Midnight found us straight-backed in the Toyota, Mark steering with knobbed knees. Streetlights blotted by fingered branches of birches, wind hustling browned leaves across the empty road. Fog rose and swelled from the asphalt, and, when it happened, a thin sliver of moon sliced through the clouds.

Later, Mark would tell the cops that he didn't even see the thing, that we were cruising steady until we weren't. The cops told us we were lucky, that we could've been killed, that even though the car was totaled and Mark's face and neck gouged by windshield glass, we were blessed to walk away. I didn't feel blessed, though, when I saw the body of the alabaster horse sprawled on the road, her side bloodied and torn, lengths of intestine and spangled veins of arteries spilling out. When I think back to the moment of impact, to the fog rising like a ghost from the pavement, I think of the moment I saw her, her white flanks glistening, and the certainty that, together, Mark and I were about to ruin the last beautiful thing in the world.

THE GOOD WATER

I.

Sam sails the wooden Catboat when the weather is good. He named the boat *Quarante* for the number of years he had spent on Earth. He named the crescent strip of land across the pond Red Island, and, when we met he shortened my name to Josie.

Some wives worry about their husbands messing around, and other wives worry about bank accounts and mortgages. My friends give words to these worries over glasses of red wine and cloudy espressos. I worry about my husband and the pull of the water.

“I wish I were a fisherman,” Sam says and presses his head against the windowpane.

Sam is not a fisherman. Sam is a lawyer with a degree from Brown and another from NYU.

“I’d never let you into bed.”

“I’d smell like the sea.”

“You’d smell like dead fish.”

He shrugs and stares at the water as dark clouds converge.

Our boy, Jack, doesn’t have water in his soul. He plays soccer and lacrosse. Jack likes his feet planted on solid ground, and, when he is on the boat with Sam, his face is green and for this I am thankful.

It is not just the sailboat—it is the five surfboards leaning against the side of the house, the windsurfer with the patched sail, the paddleboards and the kayaks and the canoe coming to pieces in the front yard. It is the wetsuit swinging like a hanged man from the rafters.

Sam and I were married on Squibnocket beach in early September. The tourists had gone and the place was deserted. I wore a white dress ordered from a catalogue and Sam's hair blew dark across his face. The air smelled like salt and the cheers of our guests were carried away by the wind and it was not until later that I realized Sam had also made a promise to the ocean.

II.

When Sam was a boy, he was struck by lightning. His mother found him laying loose-limbed in the woods. Smoke drifted from his clothes. Under his mother's frenzied hands his skin was electric.

When we first met, Sam showed me photographs of the fern-like scars that spanned from clavicle to belly button, the branching path of energy cartwheeling through his veins. The brown marks faded over the next three days, blushing pink until they were a memory.

When the sky is gray and thunder shakes the window panes, Sam knows when lightning will come. He can feel it in his chest, as familiar as his own heartbeat. Sam says the lightning is still inside him waiting to get out, the wrath of Zeus bottled in the chest of a plain man. When he says these things, I wonder when the heat will give up its burn and return my husband to me.

Jack likes to hear this story. He likes the pictures of his father's scars and he likes to tell the other kids that the lightning burned quarter-sized holes through Sam's socks.

On nights when the pressure drops and storm clouds threaten offshore, Sam and Jack sit beneath flickering candles at the scarred kitchen table. Between them a stopwatch and two piles of quarters. As thunder groans in the distance, Sam will start the timer. With the storm rolling over the island, Sam and Jack bet quarters across the surface of the table, calling out when the lightning will strike. The stopwatch pauses then speeds forward as flashes of light illuminate the kitchen.

Quarters glint.

Arms of chairs are arms of men.

Teeth shine white.

Sam lets Jack win about half the time, betting towers of quarters seconds too early. Sam shrugs with each loss as Jack stacks quarters in even piles.

Sam pushes his remaining change toward our son.

“Lightning,” he lectures, “never strikes twice.”

III.

My friend Abby's husband died a year ago. He drowned, not in a pool or lake or shoreless ocean, but sweat-soaked in a hospital bed. In the end, words leaked from his mouth.

...three hearts for every octopus.

...herrings lay seige.

...the heart of a shrimp beats in his head.

Under white sheets his lungs filled with fluid while his pulse shimmied in a swollen throat. When Abby speaks of her husband's death, I don't know what to say. I imagine my husband's death and in a way it's a relief. Sam, tucked forever into the earth, out of reach of the sea.

I walk the beach with Abby as the tides change and our shadows are those of giants or mice. The waves churn and spit mermaid's pearls onto shore, the wind sweeping our words out to sea. She says this is the best time to look for sand dollars, when the ocean is pulling two ways at once, a man of two minds.

There is a legend my friend believes about sand dollars. Inside the shell, five dormant doves wait to be released, to carry joy and happiness to the world on their white, white wings. My friend fills blue-tinged mason jars with these fragile shells. Windowsills, bedside tables, bookshelves lined with sun-bleached skeletons.

Every morning she gently cracks the shell of a sand dollar, hoping to see white feathers and hear wakening coos.

But I know better. Sand dollars have only brought me sorrow, springing five fat leeches into the world. A thousand broken mirrors, a sea of black cats, partnerless dances under ladders.

On these morning walks I watch warily as Abby gently places sand dollars in lined bags.
When she inspects a shell on her open palm I step away.
Bet your bottom douleur.

IV.

Sam and I left Boston fifteen years ago. In the rearview mirror of the rented pick up, I watched the skyline shrink and felt no sadness. On the ferry to the island Sam and I stood on deck, the wind was warm and gentle and beside us a flock of seagulls pumped their wings.

Before Jack was born, we lived in a rented clapboard cottage that hugged the side of the red clay cliffs at Lucy Vincent Beach. That first winter brought squalls and Nor'easters, storms that shook the house and clawed at the earth. Sam would measure the distance between our back door and the cliff in hand-lengths, his long fingers white against browning grass. As winter pressed forward and the soil fell away it began to feel as though we were living on the edge of the earth.

By the time Sam bought the house on the harbor, the cottage on the cliff had fallen, shingles and glass and door knobs hitting the shore to be swept away by hungry waves. Centuries ago, a whaling captain had built the harbor house for his young bridee, a gift to a lonesome girl from a man who would spend more time in the arms of the sea than those of his wife.

On the roof, he built a widow's walk.

The kids in the neighborhood told Jack that the house was haunted by the Blue Lady, a woman lashed forever to the shore of this island. She has been sighted pacing our roof, her feet wearing paint off the white boards. She faces the ocean with lidless eyes and her footsteps can be heard echoing down empty streets.

When Sam is on the water in bad weather I climb the steps to the roof. The island unfolds in front of me, trees and rocks and spiders and scallop shells living and dying in a single glance. The wind changes, bolstering offshore clouds and I imagine I can see my husband on his boat,

laughing as rain starts to fall, unfurling the sail to better catch the quick gusts. As I pace, I worry that these walks will last forever.

On these days, I wear the blue mantle of a forgotten woman.

V.

I am not a Catholic, but, at the Harbor Shrine I light blue and green votives and pray to saints I learned about on the Internet.

A candle for Saint Benedict to keep the water from our home.

A candle for Saint Elmo to keep the water from Sam's lungs.

A candle for Saint Agnes to keep the water from Sam's heart.

The shrine is folded among the fishing sheds in Menemsha and during summer glistening green ivy climbs the brick walls. Inside it is cool and damp and flickering flames throw tall shadows against the wall. Thick layers of brick silence the moan of the sea and the smell of wet clay rises from the floor. On the altar a plaster statue of an open-armed Mary studies the ground.

Women come and go with bowed heads.

Candles are lit then forgotten.

It was Abby who first brought me to this place. In her purse, a tupperware full of perfect sand dollars. She lit two candles for her husband, scrawled his name on the glass sides in black sharpie. We sat knee to knee in a small pew and beside me Abby ground the shells between her fingers until the floor was covered in a layer of white dust. Here, in this place of bone and stone, I feel at home.

Wax sputters as a wick dies.

“What do you pray for?” she asks.

I shrug and grind the toe of my boot into the white powder.

“Nothing so important.”

It is easy to lie in the light of a hundred burning prayers.

VI.

The first Loon fell from the sky in December.

Jack found the body on Crescent Beach, neck snapped, wings splayed. In the light from the winter sun, the bird's open eyes glowed black. Scientists cited a rare, winter-blooming fungus as the cause. The local paper deemed the deaths the cantering of an unidentified fifth horseman of a coming apocalypse. Online commenters blamed big business for poisoning the earth. In the marble eyes of the fallen birds, I saw only my own reflection.

The Loons continued to fall for the next month, their bodies leaving cross shaped imprints in the cold sand.

At night, Jack would ask Sam to check under his bed and behind the dresser for the Loon Killer, a big-faced man who snatched birds from the sky with pointed teeth.

Animal control officers in yellow vests swept the beach each morning, loading the slick feathered bodies into black trash bags. From our window, I watched as the bags were loaded into beds of pickup trucks. Sharp beaks poked holes through black plastic that shrouded the curve of strong wings.

At the Harbor Shrine, I lit white candles to Saint Francis of Assisi.

In the night I tried to remember the birds in flight, imagining the places their dark wings had touched. Skyscrapers and empty pastures, slumped houses and the bottoms of tidepools. Bodies illuminated against a burning yellow sun, eyes bright and cries gleeful as they swooped and dove over the endless sea.

Those nights, Sam placed his hands in front of the bedside lamp, thumbs touching at the nail to form a W. He wriggled his fingers and on the far wall the black figure of a bird would

dance and roll as Sam's mouth formed quiet calls. In time, my smaller bird greeted his, shadowing his movements before rising higher and higher towards the edge of the glowing world and disappearing into darkness.

The lone bird is only the silhouette of a man's empty hands.

VII.

Despite the years, the local women still mistrust me. I am not one of them. I was not born on this island, neither was my father, and my mother never haggled over the price of swordfish on a windswept dock. I wear the same clothes as these women, lace on hiking boots, let my makeup expire. After a particularly long winter, I consider lancing my right nostril with a silver hoop. Despite these attempts, they can still smell the mainland on me.

Besides, I stole one of the island's sons, and, for that, I will never be forgiven.

Sam can trace his family's presence on this rock through the names of streets and the faces in photographs. At the grocery store, the cashiers do not charge him for paper bags, and, at bars, his beers cost the same as those the lifers drink. When bobbing in the middle of the ocean on his longboard, seasoned surfers will give him the right of way. They watch as the waves carry him to shore, the fin of his board scratching a white line across the ocean, and from the beach it seems he walks on water.

I am told that when Sam returned to the island with me in tow, his family placed bets on the date of my departure. His mother was convinced I'd make it no further than Labor Day, while Sam's sister rolled her eyes. Uncle Dave gave me until the first snow. As the days shortened and the sky darkened, he was certain that I'd be back on the ferry, searching the empty ocean for the curve of mainland.

Sam laughs when I tell him I still don't belong. He pulls me close. Mixed with the wool of his sweater is the brine of the sea.

Sam tells me he knows what my epitaph will read.

"What's that?"

“An islander at last.”

I want to throw up hackles at that comment, but outside the bay windows a purple spot of sky is thickening and seeping closer. Soon, rain will come and then lightning will serrate the sky, thunder lagging behind. Jack will pad downstairs, quarter roll in hand. I will watch as my son and husband gamble on the light, imagine a time years after my death when tourists will wander the island cemetery and snap iPhone photos of celebrity resting places. Our family plot will be indiscernible from those of the lifers. Under six feet of earth, my bones will be dust, mixing with the sanded soil until I am the island and the island is me and when we meet a someday tree we will pause. Here, we will urge. Here, go ahead and take root.

ON ISLAND

This year, I went to so many poetry readings that I started calling my boyfriend of two weeks my partner. In bricked basements of midtown bars, bird-boned men and women cooed and shrilled, slung half rhymes in pitched voices. After, Adam and I guzzled free wine until our teeth grayed and then we hoofed it back to my one bedroom to drink more wine and spark cigarettes out the bathroom window. This year, I was hungover and dehydrated and my psoriasis flared and flaked and by the time winter break rolled around, I winced at the sound of my own voice.

#

Thick clouds of brine roll off choppy water as the ferry lurches across open sea. On deck, I bob and sway with the rhythm of the waves. Thick-bodied gulls circle overhead. The sky is dark and close, mirroring the ashy grayness of the throbbing water and it is hard to tell where sky ends and ocean begins. A crack in the horizon, a crescent of brown bleeding towards green as the engine turns over. The lighthouse rises from the mist, white clapboard sides climb to a belled peak, yellow beam severs the sky. A pair of tourists in matching Woods Hole sweatshirts coo over the rainbow sailboats dancing in the wake and before the ferry bumps into the harbor. Coming back to the island was an impulse decision, but staying in New York another minute would have sent me around a bend I might never have returned from.

Vineyard Haven is shuttered store fronts and empty sidewalks. Closed for the Season signs paper vacant windows as a single taxi idles in the Stop and Shop parking lot.

In the rental, my hands move automatically on the wheel, shifting left and right as the road twists and dips. Finger-like branches of skeletal trees pierce the bullet sky. The smell of

earth and water rises through rolled-down windows as brightly painted houses are swallowed by leafless woods. The sky is running black as I pull into the shell-lined driveway of my parents' summer home, teal Suburban sagging in browning grass. Rain falls as I fit my key into the lock.

The alarm system sings. I key in my mother's birthday, my father's, then my own as the screen spells *intruder* in bold-fonted letters.

By the time the police cruiser arrives, I've silenced the beeping and am terry-cloth robed and slippered and a glass of red wine deep. I open the front door to a slope-shouldered officer with an acne-pitted face.

Last time I saw Teddy he was rolling pizzas at the Chilmark store. Now baby fat is replaced by sinewy muscle.

He blinks twice.

"Emma. Jesus, I didn't know you were back on island."

I tell him it's just for a couple of weeks.

Rain is coming down hard now. The ping-pong of drops on the tin roof echoes out into the woods.

Teddy asks if my folks are down south for the winter and I tell him no, they're on safari in Tanzania, moving across open plains with horned animals I've only seen in photographs.

"Taurus know you're here?"

I shake my head as Teddy nods and scratches his chin. In the line of his jaw I see the shadow of the red-faced stoner who sold pot alongside pizzas.

The radio on his lapel crackles a three, a nine, a zero. Teddy reaches towards me, places his hand on my elbow. He asks me if he'll see me around. Sure, I say. Sure.

Fat drops fall like a curtain between us.

By midnight the rain has passed. I lay in my unfamiliar bed and listen to the clanging of the bell buoy breaking through the night.

I wake in a snarl of sheets and blankets and imagine the sounds filling my darkened apartment and the cracks of New York as the city wheezes into life. Alarms ring, bad news bearing papers hit slimed sidewalk with a solid thud as yellow taxi cabs cruise down trash-flanked streets.

Manhattan is mine only on these early mornings as empty subway cars burrow beneath the sleeping city. Sun's weak light creeps down streets and up scaffolding and it is almost possible to see stars overhead, to hear the quiet sweep of the Hudson. It is almost possible to imagine a patch of untouched land.

When the island pulled at me, I would take the subway to fifth and forty-second where the stone-faced lions stand sentinel. Old maps and photos. Fishermen with harpoons and women pacing widows' walks. It was here I found an aerial photo of the island, the shore peeking through blues in deepening hues. I would trace the shape of the island on rice paper, my fingers marching down Devil's Bridge

I wrap the comforter around my shoulders and open the door to the porch, bare feet curling against cold boards. Bright stars in a bruised sky. I gaze at the tacked-up figure of the bull. The sun breaks through the tree line and I stare directly into the light where Taurus glistened until black spots appear and I am forced to look away.

#

Taurus and I met on Lucy Vincent Beach on a windy day in the middle of October. I had been living at my parents' summer home since graduating school in May under the provision that I would leave by the next summer. That day, fat white clouds barreled across a light sky. Taurus' dog, Charlemagne, had snapped free of her leash and was flying down the shore. Her red coat shone in the sun and her legs kicked up storms of sand. She ran circles around me, her breath hot on my palms as her sandpaper tongue darted across my hands. I grabbed her collar and she stilled.

A man jogged towards us, fair hair blowing light across his face.

"She's only five months."

He took her collar from me, tying the frayed end of the leash. Charlemagne started moving again, diving and rolling in the wet sand.

"A loon feather for your troubles," Taurus said, a finger-length feather pressed into the palm of my hand.

He and Charlemagne charged down the beach, shadows stretching and shrinking as the sun moved through the sky. Between my fingers, the feather was slick and damp. Twin white spots at the tip, eyes of a lightning god or maybe a drained man. In the car, I held the feather in my palm and imagining the red-eyed bird's black wings unfurling from his body as he rose from water and soared into limitless sky.

It was Taurus again a week later at James Cagney's old place, acres of scaly grass rolling down to black water. A bonfire blazed in the center of the property, flames licking at the sky. Two broad-backed men hauled a piano from a truck bed into the spitting embers and fire shot up wooden legs, slithering hungrily across toothed keys.

The beer in the solo cup was warm and thick and heady and I sipped it slowly as I perched on the edge of a picnic table. The smell of pot hung in the air and in the darkness a guitar picked at an unwilling melody.

Across the dying fire, the tow-headed man from the beach stood with folded arms.

In the moonless night, Taurus and I played badminton, racquets cutting blindly through air. After, he produced a bottle of Jim Beam from a coat pocket and we sat in damp grass as the fire swallowed splinters of piano.

Breeze rose off the pond, unravelling dense clouds.

I asked Taurus to tell me the story of the bull in the sky.

Zeus, king of the gods, as an alabaster bull, kneeling before a lost girl on a speckled shore. On his back, he carried her into the water and away from her home, her hair dancing in the wind as soft wake swept across the tops of her thighs. They swam as one to the island of Crete and on steady ground the bull was a golden man. To her, he promised the sea to the tops of the trees, the boulders and invisible creatures, the dirt and the hills and the very air, if she would have it.

October moved forward, days spooling together while overhead the stars shifted.

The library was quiet during the winter. I shelved new arrivals in the morning and spent afternoons applying to teaching jobs, widening my search from Massachusetts down to Jersey. I talked of finding a job on island and soon it wasn't just myself I was fooling.

In the middle of the dark woods by Stone Wall Beach, Taurus was building a barn on the property left to him by his grandfather. He spent hours stolen from the shipyard under patches of shadowed sun.

On days when the wind was quiet, Taurus and I would climb Peaked Hill. The land stretched in all directions, leaves of trees shivering along the island's spine. Taurus would point to slivers of beach and rounded knolls, tell me of hidden places only locals knew. And I started to feel that maybe this way mine, too.

The day I got a job in New York City, Taurus spent the afternoon on his boat. At the barn that night a two foot Bluefin tuna glistened on the counter. The emptied eye of the fish stared at the sky and as I leaned over my face was tiny in his unseeing eye. That night Taurus cooked over a cowboy fire. We ate bloody tuna steaks and after Taurus buried the carcass in the darkness beyond the trees.

Taurus spent more time at the barn, coming home late, the smell of sweat and pine rolling from his body. In the pockets of his jeans I found receipts and napkins, measurements and drawings in pencil. I imagined him in the woods, the sound of his hammer ringing like lightning through the trees, sweat zigzagging down his back.

He promised the barn would be done before I left.

Sun burned yellow in the cloudless sky. I stood on deck as the boat drew away from the harbor and searched for Taurus among the waving hands. In the parking lot I saw the glint of white hair moving through snaking cars. I looked away and waved to strangers until their faces blurred and the horn cried out into the air.

#

In the morning air, the house is eerie. Half-full glasses of water on the dining room table and a week's worth of Wall Street Journals sighing beside my father's chair. Cast-off flip flops

bleach under the winter sun on the flagstone porch and I almost expect my mother to come out from the garden, to push sprigs of basil under my nose.

I drink bitter espresso and walk through empty rooms. Fat flies buzz sluggishly through the air before their swollen bodies drag them to the ground. Mouse droppings in chairs, in beds, in drawers and the fridge molding in the stagnant air.

The sky glints metallic over white-capped Menemsha Pond.

The loud voices of men and the yipping of dogs carry over the water. A bird whistle sings with the wind. A single shot and I am reminded it is hunting season.

Four camouflaged men cross the front lawn with shotguns angled over shoulders. They are heavy-set, well-coiffed men with Boston accents and brand new shotguns. The largest man fires, a flurry of birds rise from low brush, feathers helicoptering as mournful calls linger in the air. A small, brown and white speckled dog returns with a limp bird in his mouth, blood dusting his jaw.

Outside, the wind is lifting at the hem of my dress as three small dogs cry and run circles around my legs.

"You can't be here," I call to the men. "We have signs posted."

The largest comes towards me, gun pointed to the ground.

He tells me they're up visiting from Boston on a bachelor party. They have a local guide and permission from the landowners.

The barrel of his gun glints in the January sun. The reflection of the pond moves in blue gray breaths over the polished metal.

"Who's your guide?"

He shrugs.

"You can't be here," I repeat and turn towards the house. "I want you off this land."

Wind hisses through overgrown grass.

"We'll be out of your way."

I lock the door, stand at the window as a blond man steps out from tall reeds. He waves the men forward as his eyes swallow the house. I duck down below the window ledge, heart beating like hooves against my chest.

I wipe down the fridge and dance the vacuum under couches and around corners. Loads of towels and bed sheets and napkins from washer to dryer. Pillows plumped and floor mopped. Gone are the sounds of men. The wind whistles as it curls around the corners of the house.

I walk the reed-lined path down to the beach. Grass gives way to sand and stripped crab claws and broken Quahog shells turn to dust under my feet as the peaked waves clamor up the shore.

Wind picks at strands of my hair.

Sea foam cloaks every wave.

The breeze turns and I smell the pond.

Smell of decay rising from beached creatures, smell of earth seeping from waterlogged wood, smell of the promise of summer, smell of salt filling nose and throat.

I listen for the sound of the hunters but there is only waves hissing over sand and reeds exhaling as they bend with the wind. At my feet, a pile of Christmas colored shell casings and birdless feathers. Deer prints trail up and down the beach, disappearing into the water. The windows of neighboring homes are boarded. Overgrown grass and rotting porch furniture.

In summer, families spill from these houses and brightly colored kayaks rest in the marsh. Sailboats and motorboats trail lines of wake up and down the pond and rainbow umbrellas staked in warm sand. I have spent ten summers here, searching out hermit crabs and skinny dipping with invisible creatures. At the public beach tourists cheer for every setting sun.

#

I waited until the sun set.

Branches scratch at the side of the jeep and the ruts in the road are deep and sudden and dry. Ahead light falls in slats through thick branches. The barn rises up before me, wooden sides culled from trees that have shaded this land always. Even here in the darkness of the woods the bell buoy clangs. Smell of charcoal in the air.

Before, the barn was bones and we could only spend the night when it was warm and even then Taurus would have to lace a tarp over the second story. Now wooden sides stand tall and gray, having weathered a full winter.

At the front door I pause.

In the woods, an owl cries.

Through the pane of glass I see Taurus.

See Taurus at the stove with blond hair tucked behind his ears. See Taurus in dirt-dusted Carhartt coveralls. See Taurus with dark blond stubble. See Taurus taller than I remember.

Inside it is warm and a fire spits red up a bricked chimney. Charlemagne sits on my feet as I stroke her head. Her tail thumps against the floorboards.

Taurus is silent.

On the walls hang his mother's paintings. The greens and pinks and golds of a perfect sunset. Dark wings against a white winter sky. From a self-portrait, Judy's gray eyes follow my movements.

"It's done," I say.

And it is. Water pours through taps and electricity runs through wired walls. Four sides, two stories, glassed windows and Taurus' paper dreams are wood.

He nods.

"When?"

"Last November."

Charlemagne's nails tap as she moves across the floor.

The walls are puzzled wood that Taurus gathered ever since he was a boy. Strips of paint-chipped wood from the schooner, Alabama, a boat that sailed dead seas before returning to the island's whale shaped coast as her final resting place. Pieces of warped drift wood collected from beaches, hunks from doors and walls of fishing shacks. Splinters that were swept from shores and returned by the same magnetic waves.

Carved initials. A whittled feather.

"Come see," Taurus says.

I feel my anger ebb as my fingers brush sea-shaped edges.

Upstairs the loft is open. High eaves and tall windows.

Taurus slides open a panel, the boards of a porch stretch out into darkness.

The sky is black and the song of the bell buoy echoes through the trees.

My nose twitches for the ocean.

In the light of the half-born moon, I imagine can see the curve of my parents' rounded roof. The ocean storming the shore. Naked trees aching for summer.

The Aquinnah cliffs are silent giants hunched on the edge of the northern point.

Under these waters hide the sharp-skinned Rocks of Devil's Bridge, waiting to swipe at swimmers or tear through the bottoms of boats.

Clouds gather then slip away. Stars fizzle but I do not look up.

Moonlight disfigures the ground.

The wind blows the ocean towards us and in the light of the moon the black water is silver, shapes dancing on the jumping surface. The island stretches on forever, cascading green hills hide secrets and in the trees a whisper of unknown land. The lighthouse beam swings through the trees, calling lost sailors home.

LOST YEAR

Twenty-seven is too old for my sister to run away from home, but, after seven unreturned phone calls, I started seeing signs in vegetables. In the produce section at Cronig's, the browning bruises on bananas read clear as any subway map, the tilted stem of an apple pointed south—a sweet-skinned compass. Against my palm, the beveled rinds of oranges told a story of the black tongues of highways and flickering motel signs.

#

My sister started chasing our mother's ghost twelve years ago, thumbing her way from Chilmark to Vineyard Haven in forty minutes, a personal record. At the harbor, white caps rose and fell in a July wind as tourists licked ice cream cones in souvenir t-shirts and snapped photos of the A-frame houses hugging the shore. Beth traded eight dollars for passage to the mainland as, overhead, gulls pumped dappled wings. She spent three weeks in Manhattan, stalked gridded streets, spent nights in the mildewed apartment of a NYU freshman she had met on an island beach. By the time she returned, summer had fizzled, store fronts boarded, SEE YOU NEXT SUMMER signs yellowed in empty windows as the green leaves of trees burned red and orange and gold.

#

Our mother came to the island for a summer and stayed eleven years. Our bedtime stories were not of an ash girl turned queen, but of places she had stopped before getting to us: a fountain of youth run dry in Delaware, a thirty foot tall statue of denim-legged Paul Bunyon cradling a hot dog along route 66, the matchstick walls of an impossibly small house in South Carolina. Our

parents were not happy. Often, our mother accused our father of loving the sea too much, of being gone too often, of trapping her. On a Wednesday at the end of August, Beth and I napped as our mother packed. We woke to the front door ajar, the dust of dirt roads trailing her while, overhead, cicadas buzzed swan songs.

#

Kidnapped, Beth said. No, I countered. Alien abduction. We went on. She was a CIA operative—had been all along. She witnessed a murder and was immediately relocated to somewhere in the corn fattened Midwest by the witness protection program. She was a Russian spy, maybe, gathering information on the shipping ports of the east coast but was called back to Kiev. Naturally clumsy, she had wandered through a time portal. She was the first called to heaven during the rapture and was waiting for us patiently at the pearly gates. Anything to avoid the simple fact that she had left us.

#

Winter nights on the island with my sister went like this: Beth and I raced through red solo cups of beer or glasses of just-turned wine in the overgrown backyard of a seasonal stranger's home. Acres of overgrown grass whistling down to black water as burning wood cracked and hissed, flames licking the sky. I clapped as Isaac Matthews or Josh Riggs hauled a piano or a bed frame or a bookcase from a truck bed into the spitting embers while, beside me, my sister sighed. Tongues of fire shot up wooden legs then slithered hungrily across keys, a headboard, shelves. The smell of pot in the air, and, in the darkness, a guitar forced an unwilling melody.

#

In the harbor, raisin-faced men whose bony knees bounced us as babies sat on the bench at Squid Row, pipes pursed upside down in thinning lips as light rain misted. Trawlers bumped into the harbor, their metal wings tucked to paint-chipped sides. Beth named boats as they jolted into wooden berths. *Globe Trotter, Unicorn, Persephone*. I scanned the fogged horizon for the blue of our father's fishing boat, scheduled to return after a three-day stint. In my chest, my heart jitterbugged, egged on by seven cups of gas station coffee. Spending the moonless night on the harbor had been Beth's idea and even though Dad had left me in charge, I got caught up in Beth's excitement and we passed hours pressed on our stomachs, a flood lamp dangling between us, shining over the water. Carrot-shaped bodies of squid tornadoed around the green light of the lamp, slick, ink-filled sides pulsing, it seemed, to the beat of a single heart. Did you know that giant squid eyeballs are bigger than basketballs? That they nibble their neighbors without giving it a second thought? That three hearts thump in every chest? In the ice-filled cooler, rippling skin flushed from white to red to brown as water rushed from pores and thick black ink pooled.

#

At Coca Cola Beach, the water runs brown from iron that swirls and pools in damp sand. Beth and I shared a towel on the shore and watched surfers bob on the black and blue Atlantic swells. In the spray of retreating waves, sandpipers rushed, calls drowned by the surf. Beth eyed the tiny birds, imagining the places their fine-feathered wings had touched—the roofs of skyscrapers and the grass of empty pastures, the flaking shingles of slumped houses, the drowned bottoms of tidal pools.

#

After high school, Beth would trade Coca Cola Beach and unblinking, blue-veined squid for the land-locked hayfields of Western Massachusetts and a scholarship to a liberal arts school where she would study marine biology, devouring texts on deep-sea creatures, penciling outlines of tentacled animals hiding deep in the crevices at the bottom of the earth, heads ringed with barnacle crowns. She replaced the backpack with a rolling luggage set purchased from a Macy's catalogue, brimming with extra-long sheets. At a mainland Walmart, we flexed our father's credit card, filling the back of our mother's left behind Suburban with shiny appliances: toaster oven, microwave, mini fridge. After the car was emptied and Beth unpacked, I bore down on the twists and curves of unfamiliar highways lined with thin trees molting white blossoms. I longed for the ocean's brine, the clang of the bell buoy.

#

Beth called me from a payphone at the Boston Greyhound station, saying that she was coming home. That it was foolish to think she could ever have left. In my sister's two year absence, I had slipped into an easy rhythm. Days spent on the ice-choked docks, hauling in catches from the trawlers. Stringy, hard muscles in my arms and chapped fingers. In my back pocket, a sharp knife to butterfly wriggling fish from chin to fin. My nights were spent with Isaac Matthews, gulping foam-topped beers at the Ritz or the Lamppost then driving back to Isaac's cabin outside of town, soothed to sleep by the wind humming around the sharp edges of the roof.

#

Ice slicks floated across the gray, swirling surface of the sea. Frozen sand and rocks and seaweed crunched under booted feet and my sister slaved hours to open-eyed dreams of palm trees in her childhood bedroom. The front page of the *Vineyard Gazette* declared this winter the coldest of

the century, reproducing black and white photos of an unmoving, ice-choked Atlantic, a thick-maned mare pulling a carriage across the frozen sea. The day after the photo was printed, the three Riggs boys, drunk on Jameson, drove their mother's baby-shit-green Datsun Wagon across Aquinnah Pond, spitting streams of whiskey and belly-laughing as ice splintered under spinning tires.

#

Beth left the third time the morning our neighbor's Irish Setter, Lily, broke through the splintered ice of Quanset Pond, canines snapping at the white-slicked back of a skunk. I shrugged when Beth rolled her eyes and declined my offer to join the search. In the graveled driveway, the exhaust from Isaac's pickup spiraled. As ice filmed over the dog-sized patch of open water, the town congregated on the Hoxsies' back porch, let Mary Ann Hoxsie bless us with Styrofoam cops of hot chocolate then trod boot prints into the white snow of untouched deer paths and called out the red-haired dog's name. Under cover of ice-coated branches, Isaac and I scanned the snow for the heart-shaped prints of four paws as my sister drove her rust-flecked pickup to the ferry, left her keys dangling in the ignition.

#

Two weeks passed before I heard my sister's voice crackle through the landline at my father's house. Florida, she said, was silky beaches, leg tattoos, land stretching green and flat for miles, dotted with the white of towering crosses. She had found a dog, she said. She had found a god. I laughed, assuming this god would be the god of stamp collecting, of poetry translation, of botany, but Beth was silent. Before the sun set, I had called out of work or the week and was keying in my credit card number on JetBlue's website and trading my snow boots for rain boots.

#

The Cape Air flight from the island to Boston was nearly empty. As the small plane's propellers whirred and wheels lifted from yellow-striped runway, I understood why the airline is dubbed Cape Fear. I hail-Maryed prayers at random Saints. The plane bucked and dove, climbing higher into the graying afternoon. The leaves and chimneys and covered swimming pools of the island fell away to the hungry, white-capped swells of the ocean. Then we were skidding onto the slick runway at Logan, my stomach still floating in the snow-heavy clouds. On the flight to Orlando, I slept sandwiched between strangers in Mickey Mouse t-shirts and woke as the Captain's voice joked over the intercom: Welcome to Vegas.

#

My sister rents a small oceanfront suite with a kitchenette at the Tropical Manor in Daytona Beach. The walls are frozen cocktails: hibiscus and banana and lime green. Bikinis dry on the backs of chairs and door handles: polka dot, floral, paisley. On rainy days, my sister plays bridge in the Flamingo Room with purple-haired old ladies who have already buried two husbands apiece. On Sundays, square-toothed Reverend Mike comes from the Episcopal Church downtown and preaches. Beth and the purple ladies are in love with him, and around Beth's tan neck a bejeweled cross pulses. When the sun shines, we sit on slatted chaises around the hibiscus-shaped pool and drink Pina Coladas surrounded by strangers, and it is this rundown resort town that makes Beth happy. As the sun traipses though the sky, we move to the beach, the fine, white sand is silk against my calloused feet.

#

Lazarus' tongue is wet and hot, nudging the soft skin between my toes. My sister found the thick-headed dog padding down the beach on a Monday morning, his tongue dry, ribs visible through tight skin. The day before, Reverend Mike shared the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and as Beth fed the dog from her open palm, she thought of Reverend Mike's peroxide smile, his thick, glossy hair.

#

NO PETS ALLOWED and IF YOU'RE SMOKING YOU BETTER BE ON FIRE signs hang beside the waxy leaves of fake plants in the front office of the hotel. Lazarus never barks, and butts of cigarettes cartwheel across the blue and white striped pool deck with the breeze. Under the Florida sky, Beth leashes Lazarus, and the three of us walk the beach. Beth searches the shorelines for the sand-submerged shells of sea turtles. One of the purple ladies, Maude or Prudence or Gylnnis, has seen the eggs hatch under guazy moonlight year after year. In the light of the waning moon, our shadows stretch and shrink. One night, Beth is a giantess, the next a dwarf, Lazarus a Clydesdale turned mouse.

#

Beth sleeps, her breaths deep and slow. On the iron-railed balcony, I watch the green and brown bodies of geckoes skitter over terra cotta as small waves wash white against a rockless shore. On the beach, tan locals spread blankets and towels far from the shade of sharp-leaved trees. The trails of beer-filled coolers leave ruts in the sand. As the sun bloodies the horizon, the hum of insects rises and birds unfurl tucked wings before taking to the brightening sky. In the light of the blinding sun, it's easy to forget the frozen bodies of birds cluttering the ice slicked shores of the island.

#

Beth spends too much money on the rented ragtop convertible, handing her credit card to the acne-faced kid at the rental counter with a shrug. We nose down I-4. In the hot sun, I am queasy from the tequila and sour mix from the night before. Drunk on margaritas, I promised Beth I'd make the drive to Orlando with her to the Jesus theme park, would fork over fifty dollars to count animals two by two in the Garden of Eden so on Sunday Beth could prove her devotion to Reverend Mike. On the side of the highway, billboards advertise painless vasectomies, Smokin' D's Barbeque, ninety-nine dollar divorces. Palm fronds sag in the heat and Beth cranks the air conditioning, warbling along with Carly Simon as she laments the vanity of all men.

#

At the Holy Land Experience, the applause in the darkened amphitheater runs on an automatic track, encouraging fat-necked tourists and youth groups to join in before actors decked in jewel-toned costumes have delivered repentant lines. Outside lions and lambs in grubby costumes walk side by side. Four-fingered plush paws hold billboards counting down the minutes to the next crucifixion, and girls in short-shorts snap selfies with the cheap, plastic likeness of Christ. Young children stare wide-eyed at the gold-rimmed coliseum while paper-skinned women cross themselves before entering the chapel. The gift shop sells t-shirts and key chains, engagement rings and fragile scaled models of Jerusalem. Beth cracks that the place should be called the *Wholly Bland Experience* but buys postcards of a thorn-crowned Jesus for the purple ladies back at the Tropical Manner anyway. As we exit through the pink-gummed mouth of Jonah's whale, she tells me that the heart of an Orca weighs as much as a mid-sized sedan.

#

Later, ice will melt to water and run in heavy streams from gutters and rocks and roofs of cars while buds nudge at thawing earth. Drunk, the youngest, squarest jawed Riggs boy will floor his truck through the brick front of Larsen's fish market, losing his movie star head and liberating tanks of lobsters to two-step, drunk on freedom and oxygen, on the cement sidewalk, bound claws held aloft. Tourists will return to the island, snatching up hair appointments and parking spots, stumbling drunk into the streets to stare gape-jawed at the clearest skies they've ever seen.

#

Early one June morning, the water-logged body of the Hoxsies' red-haired dog will be pulled to the surface of Quanset Pond by a pair of eager fisherman mistaking the taught line for a derby winning Striper. Even later, I will return to the island after turning down Beth's offer to wander, tan-skinned in a rental car with Lazarus' wet nose pressed to the glass of the rolled-up window. Lazarus will pad silently behind me over the grooves of Isaac's wood floors, over sand, over ice. For the next few years, pastel postcards from Beth will drop into my mailbox: Grand Canyon State, Garden State, Golden State, before stopping altogether.

#

For now, though, I crouch beside my sister in the damp sand as the earth erupts with the soft skulls of slit-eyed turtles. Beside Beth, Lazarus' tail sweeps the sand. My sister is talking about the turtles, about their internal magnetic compass, their natural inclination to head for the greater light intensity of the open horizon. How, for the first year of their lives, baby sea turtles are rarely seen, and that this period of time is known as the lost year. I am thinking about my mother, about her final passage from the island, wondering if, as the sun dipped below the horizon, she saw the pulsing endless ocean or the curve of the mainland. The sea retreats and returns, washing

our feet with warm, foaming water as waves of tiny, dark-shelled turtles clamor over one another, rushing toward certain darkness.

THOUGH I KNOW THE RIVER IS DRY

8.

I said yes to my husband's marriage proposal for many reasons, including this: he is good in crisis. The circle of light illuminates the eaved roof, the dormer window, the rope handle of the trap door. Chris stalks the unfinished attic and I know what he is doing—he is looking for a way out. If the water comes, and it most likely will, he'll have a contingency plan. When gum was stuck in my hair he was ready with a jar of Skippy. When our grass browned, he replaced the mower blade. When I guzzled too many pinots he zested the pit of my drinking arm with a lemon and I woke sans hangover. He only screwed up one time, but that was the hold-onto-your-hats time, the this-one-is-gonna-leave-a-mark time. When our daughter, Jessie, died Chris floundered and I never forgave him. I lie on my back, listen to the rain pummel the roof. In the attic, I can't hear the water moving through the downstairs, bloating walls, busting doors and windows to the unblinking stares of striped bass. Chris paces, eyes his prospects, the flashlight beam shines like a gameshow spotlight: three pairs of skis from that trip to Telluride. Loved-raw Care Bear collection. Unwound grandfather clock. I want to tell Chris that it is okay, that, despite his best efforts, he might not be able to turn that old trunk into a makeshift boat and captain us down our street-turned-river. But I don't. I don't tell him that some things can't be fixed. Instead, I watch him upend cardboard bokes and sift through trash bags of old dresses with padded shoulders and double breasted suits. I mentally unspool the black tape of the homemade VHS that brought us here. Below, I imagine the dark water rearranging our furniture, bidding us welcome to our brand new life.

7.

Our game of war wore on but Chris had all the aces and my face cards made little difference. We had smoked through a half dozen candles while sitting Indian style on our California king and, although Chris was pretending to keep his attention on the game, I knew he was itemizing our small stockpile, hedging our proverbial bets. In the blinking light of the candle, Chris swept my two of hearts with his Queen of diamonds. It was then that I smelled it—smelled it before I saw it—that briney, cloying scent that smells nothing like the *Surfside* or *Beach House* or *Ocean View* candles that inlanders buy in bulk to beach-treat their houses. But then I saw it, and it was black and it was seeping under the door and racing across the carpet and, before I really realized what was happening, it was ankle deep.

Chris grabbed my wrist and our supply bag and we were wading through it, the water cold and heavy and newly knee-deep. In the light of Chris's waxing candle, a tire bobbed towards our bed, a folding chair. A George Foreman grill swanned by, sparking silver in the dying light of the candle. By the time we reached the door, it was all frame, anyway, so we waded down the hallway. I braced myself against the walls when Chris let go of my hand. The water tugged at my jeans and I widened my stance, pushing my elbows hard against the wallpaper. Chris pulled the rope to the trap door and pushed me towards the pull-down ladder. Briefly, when my hands connected with the metal, I considered letting go. But Chris shoved me and then I was crowning into darkness, the attic thick and silent, the scent filling my lungs. It smelled like pine and moth balls and as I pulled myself onto the unfinished floor, splinters wormed under the soft skin of my hands.

6.

Shortly after we returned from our daily walk, the rain came. Chris and I made trips up and down the stairs, carrying boxes of matches, candles, gallons of water. Downstairs, it felt like night, the boards across the windows blotting out the gray afternoon, drops hammering against the plywood.

Chris and I sat beneath the picture window in our second story bedroom, a deck of cards fanned between us. The rain fell in thick waves now, the wind rattling at the storm windows. Water pooled in the streets, sputtering out of storm drains.

Chris and I flipped our cards my queen taking his nine of hearts as the lights flickered.

Outside, the ocean was pushing forward past the two rows of homes that separated our home from the beach. White-capped waves broke in the middle of the street as water surged around the corners of houses. I stood and walked to the window, letting my forehead rest against the cold glass. On the street, the water reared, pushing over the land in quick swells, lapping at windowsills and devouring porches. Leafless trees bent in two from the force of the wind, their branches dipping into the roiling water. Waves as tall as men seethed around the homes of our neighbors, their peaks rising and falling. Bits of sea foam caught in the strong wind, dancing over the charging surface of the water as the wind screamed on.

I watched as the flood lights from the two blocks of houses in front of us disappeared into the curtain of rain before our street, too, was thrown into darkness. The sound of car alarms filled the air as water poured in, lights blinking red and white from driveways and garages. As the black water continued to rise, the alarms quieted. Headlights shone for an instant under the

darkness, throwing shifting shapes over the submerged asphalt before being pulled into the black water.

5.

Despite the falling leaves, it was warm for October. Chris and I could still walk the neighborhood in short sleeves, peep the leaves snap orange then red then dead as the weeks pressed on. Carved pumpkins appeared on front stoops, toothless smiles and wide eyes staring into the street.

The TV was tuned to the weather channel as I washed dishes, my fingers raising in the warm water. Chris was outside, hammering plywood strips over the windows, pulling in patio furniture and the old Weber grill. Through the small window above the sink, I could see our neighbors spilling out of their homes, arms heavy with possessions. I watched Mrs. Johnson as she tried to slip a suitcase in the passenger seat of the station wagon, but her husband, Larry, stopped her with a touch to the forearm, shook his head.

I looked at our clock, the second hand moving in quick bursts and wiped my hands on a dish towel. I went outside to find my husband. He stood in the middle of the garage, hands on hips, squinting at the circle of plywood he had spread across the concrete.

“I told you it was a good idea to keep these.”

I nodded, he had been right. Last year was Caroline, a storm the fat-toothed local weatherman had predicted would decimate our town. We had boarded up the windows, circled the house with sandbags, braved the supermarket for jugs of water and flashlight batteries. Local business owners scrawled “Sweet Caroline” on their plywood covered windows, but she scooted by us, barely spitting in our direction.

For the past week, the weather channels had tracked the storm’s progress as she spun her way up the east coast, path traced in an ever-expanding funnel of red. Our neighbors talked of

little else, huddling together at the grocery store checkout and in line at the dry cleaners, trading preparation tips and stories of past storms. A state of emergency was declared for the island, members of the National Guard arriving in lightly camouflaged uniforms and the sounds of covered trucks rumbling down the streets. Our neighbors told us we were crazy to stay, that we were too close to the ocean, the storm surge was sure to fold around our house, dragging it back to the open water. I wasn't worried, though—we had weathered worse.

“It's three,” I said.

Chris nodded and came towards me, stepping over the scattered pieces of plywood.

The night before, we fought. Chris had tried, once again, to convince me to pack a bag, pile our valuables in the car, lock the doors and leave the island in our rearview. I told him to go, to leave me behind, but, when I woke to the gray sky this morning, he was still beside me, the heat of his body warming our bed.

We take the same walk every day, a habit that, over the course of the past three years, had morphed into ritual. I kicked at the leaves as we walked the street, all red and orange and gold. Already, driveways were empty, lights off, doors locked. Our remaining neighbors piled into their cars, pulled out of driveways without bothering to look both ways, back seats full of sleeping bags, photo albums, unpolished silver.

Ahead of us, the cemetery gates rose, metal arches against a darkening sky. The tombstones were crumbling, moss climbing up the sides, numbers and letters rubbed out—the names of the town's founding members long forgotten. Chris took my hand and guided me down the familiar path to the back of the cemetery where the stones stood erect and polished, American flags snapping in the wind.

We stopped in front of our daughter's grave, her name etched in white stone. The wind was picking up, lifting at strands of my hair, twisting and snaking past the tombstones. I stood there for a moment, breathing in the scent of the sea and the earth.

"We can still leave, you know," Chris said quietly, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. "It's not too late. The ferries don't stop until five."

I shook my head and looked at him, brown hair blowing forward in the wind.

"What else do we have to lose?"

Beside me, Chris sighed, pulled at my hand.

On Atlantic Avenue, a line of cars inched down the road, engines running, exhaust billowing into the heavy sky. I could feel the eyes of our neighbors on us as we walked and I tightened my grip on Chris' hand. In the backseat of a Suburban, a dark-haired boy raised his hand solemnly to me.

When we reached the beach, Chris and I stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the chipped metal railing, looked out at the rolling gray sea, whitecaps crashing onto the beach.

"She's out there somewhere," I said, my hands twisting around the cold railing.

In the distance, thick clouds were seeping across the sky, edges bleeding together.

4.

For months after our daughter's death, our neighbors dropped off Tupperware still warm from the oven, steam clouding the insulated sides. Lasagna, green bean casserole, meatloaf, things to fill a family. Larry Johnson mowed our lawn twice a week, the sound of the turning motor mirroring the dull ache in my head, and I pressed my hands to my ears.

Chris joined a squash club, a book club, anything to fill his evenings. He would come home long after the sun had set, falling into bed beside me, pull the covers down and tell me about the world outside our walls. His words floated around me and the images he relayed were skewed, red when things should have been blue.

3.

One humid August night while Chris and I were at dinner, Jessie dove too deep. The medical examiner told me that her skull shattered as it cracked against the bottom of the pool and that she felt no pain. The medical report said she floated on her stomach for an hour before she was found by Larry Johnson, who yanked her from the black water by the T-strap of her purple racing suit. I read the autopsy only once, forcing myself to recreate her last moments, but when I see her in my mind, she never breaks the glassed surface. She is forever diving through the thick, Massachusetts night, the mosquitoes and noseeums humming beside her as the Whip-or-wills tirelessly sound their own names.

Chris and I buried her on a Wednesday under the hard packed earth—a place water would never reach. Afterwards, I cleaned her room like a Lifetime Movie Mother, folding t-shirts in the dresser, shoes marshalled at the foot of the closet. I dusted her medals and trophies, the tiny figures of gold plated swimmers standing with raised arms fit in my hand and I ran my fingers along the crest of their ridged scalps. When I was done, I closed the door, hand lingering on the knob.

Downstairs, Chris slumped on the couch, cushions rising around him. He stared at the dark television screen, white knuckles showing through clenched fists. I sat beside him, took his hand in mine, unfurled his fingers. On his palm, four tiny crescents were dug into his skin, and I kissed each indentation until the surface was smooth again.

Sometimes I imagine I can still feel Jessie lodged in my side, buried under my left rib as she was during the first nine months of her life, heartbeat an echo of my own. After her death, I

spent weeks in bed, shades drawn, comforter pulled over my head. I would place my hands on my abdomen, searching for her, finding only flesh.

2.

When Jessie started high school, she joined the swim team, spending long hours in the pool every morning and evening. She would come home smelling of chlorine, the tips of her white blonde hair tinged green, her pale forehead crowned with the imprint of her bathing cap. When I watched my daughter swim, I was in awe of her strength, the way her arms sliced through the water, her breaths so imperceptible it seemed she must have gills. At her meets, she pulled ahead of the other swimmers, her feet sending up a fury of water behind her. Chris and I cheered from the bleachers, hooting and whistling, watching as our daughter slapped her hand to the concrete lip of the pool in victory. Our neighbors, the Johnsons, let her use their lap pool on warm evenings, her pale figure sliding silently under the dark water. She practiced her starting dives, both feet pushing off the makeshift block Chris had crafted. Her slim body would fly arrow-straight through the air, tensing as she neared the surface of the water.

1.

Jessie had always loved the ocean. Even as a baby, the sound of water running from the kitchen faucet could slow her wildest cries. At night when she couldn't sleep, Chris would strap her to his chest, walk the boardwalk for hours until the stars were called back and the sun climbed in the sky.

As a toddler she spent hours on the beach, her chubby legs carrying her haltingly down the shoreline, fat fingers grasping for shells and sand. Over the years, we collected sea glass and filled mason jars, the browns and greens and blues lined up on a shelf above her bed. As she grew older, she begged for books about the ocean, idolizing Sylvia Earle and planning her life as an oceanographer, probing the depths of strangely named seas, shining light on the deepest cracks of the earth.

It was Jessie who found the tale of the ghost ship of Captain Sandovate in a tattered book of Massachusetts folklore buried in the back of the local library. She asked me to read the story to her as she fell asleep one night, the words transporting us both to a time when men roamed uncharted land, searching for gold and perpetual youth and adventure. For the next month, she asked to hear the story of the cursed sailors nearly every night before she fell asleep, her mouth forming the words in time with my own.

During the winters we spent hours in the cool, dark glass tunnel of the Camden aquarium, staring up at the green water overhead, our eyes following the ridged bellies of turtles, the writhing eels, the sad-faced sharks. In her small voice, Jessie would whisper to me tales about mermaids and Poseidon, tell me that stingrays were boneless creatures, how, in some places in

the ocean, a single anemone tentacle can kill a grown man. I watched her mouth move in wonder, her skin patterned with shifting shades of blue and green as water drifted overhead.

NOMAN'S LAND

Early November brings cold to Texas. Things die suddenly in the first freeze: wildflowers and grass and the small herb garden on my porch. Frost laces the serrated leaves of basil. On the news, record lows are reported throughout the country. In the Carolinas, three-hundred-year-old Live Oaks split down the middle from the weight of ice coating branches.

#

As a green girl, I used to dream of the day I'd dust the sand of the island from the soles of my shoes. In July, I made the drive from Massachusetts to Austin in two days. As I travelled south, the mountains shrunk and the land stretched flat and green, the shadows of towering crosses rotating with the crawl of a blinding sun. By the time I arrived, I missed the scent of the sea, the salt that coated doorknobs and thickened eyelashes.

#

At a dirty little dive bar tucked into the curve of Manchaca Road, the walls are plastered with old beer advertisements: "It works every time" and "It's what your right arm is for" and "This one has the touch!" The bartender, Dwayne, pours with a heavy hand and the jukebox warbles retired country songs. Shuffleboard pucks click and flick flashes of light on the far wall as they spin down sanded tables. It was here I'd met Steve, handsome in a square-jawed, scarred palm, cowboy-hat-wearing kind of way I'd never known. Steve who approached me with a line that should've sent me running. "You tell your momma I'm gonna marry you one day."

#

Nights when the wind blew from the north and fires burned on Noman's Land, my mother was happy. Red pinpricks on a black horizon meant open windows and a Cat Stevens record spinning on the turntable. We knew the Navy used the uninhabited land as a practice range. Low-flying planes dropped ticking cargo, scorched scrub and sand. As children, my mother told us a different tale—a story about those who slipped away from the island's embrace, wanderers who would spend the rest of their lives trying to return, but would make it no further than Noman's Land where they lit fires and stared with longing at the outline of the island's curved shore.

#

The headlight beams from Steve's red dually pickup cut across the two-lane highway, smell of honeysuckle rose through rolled-down windows as Tammy Wynette urged women all around the world to stand by their men. Steve in a cowboy Frankenstein costume, face painted green with plastic bolts anchored to neck and forehead. In the passenger seat I was his gruesome bride. The yellow eyes of small animals flashed in the dark, and, overhead stars burned white in an East Texas sky. We were maybe talking about the drunk scarecrow or maybe planning a trip to Galveston with the money from the costume contest, or maybe we were silent, letting Tammy say the words for us. Maybe he was watching my face under the beehive wig, or maybe it was the heat from my hand on his thigh. There was no maybe about the deer, no maybe about the truck skating across the dark road and through the guardrail, no maybe about the jack that, rattling loose in the bed, shattered the back window before burrowing into the fine bones of Steve's skull.

#

Steve's mother's name is Ruth Ann, but she tells me to call her Auntie Em. We meet for the first time in a pea-green hallway. Auntie Em is sixty but looks eighty. Wrinkles hammock from chin to cheek, and a gold tooth sparks in the back of her mouth. Steve is her baby, her last child of fourteen. She's already lost two girls, the youngest as an infant and the second to anorexia. Her oldest son is in prison for statutory rape. "I haven't been to visit him in two years." She tells me these things with eyes locked on the silent television as her ventriloquist dummy mouth moves up and down. Night shift nurses pass in pastel scrubs. A muted weatherman predicts flash floods for Austin. Auntie Em reaches for me, and, in the fluorescent light, the veins in her papery hands glow Caribbean blue. "I've been praying something awful."

#

Something really awful? Before calling 9-1-1, I flipped down the visor mirror to make sure the blood on my face was not my own.

#

My phone vibrates every morning at six before the sun has bloodied the sky, and I answer out of a strange sense of duty. Auntie Em updates me on Steve's arterial line reading, on his intracranial pressure, on his heart's rate and rhythm. Then she tells me about her dreams, unbidden images from childhood that come in bursts and linger unwanted through the day. For a week, she dreamed of nights spent with her father on the Mulhern's rolling land, flashlight illuminating branches and grasses and rabbits. Beside her, her father fired rounds from his shotgun into low brush until a half-formed circle of animals lay at their booted feet.

#

Jehovah's Witnesses don't celebrate birthdays because the only two mentioned in the Bible end in bloodshed. Steve grew up this way, without candles and cakes and animal-shaped piñatas spilling miniature Milky Ways and Blow Pops. I told him about my own birthdays on the island of Martha's Vineyard, lazy late August days on secret beaches, fat-bodied gulls circling close to snatch slivers of cake from sticky fingers. I bought Steve a cupcake from Whole Foods for his birthday, a big chocolate one with a spiral of tooth-numbingly sweet icing climbing to a peak. Steve laughed as the trick candle sparked again and again.

#

Steve's brother Jake wears a blue button-down shirt that strains against wide shoulders. I have met him once before at a barbeque at a friend's house in South Austin where he called Steve *Stevie* and insisted on adding handfuls of sugar to the thickening sauce. It's not just birthdays that Jehovah's witnesses don't believe in—it is Girl Scout cookies and tattoos and blood transfusions, and Jake is here in the waiting room to remind his mother of these things.

#

Steve's ex-wife called him again on our two-month anniversary. The first time she was angry. Now she was sorry. That night over dinner at Second Street Kitchen, I peeled mussels from their boomerang shells. We sat in the cooling late September night as clusters of tourists watched bats rise from Congress Avenue Bridge in a black cloud. After a second bottle of wine, I pushed Steve to tell me about his wife. He spoke of his three-month marriage to Marianne, telling me how they fell apart faster than they began. I asked him why they separated, and he shrugged. "Getting hitched was an impulsive thing to do." The lights from a police cruiser painted the street red then blue.

#

With My Hands. Off the Mangrove Coast. End of the Drive. To Tame a Land. The Burning Hills. High Lonesome. These hard books spined in red, yellow, and blue are piled beside Steve's hospital bed. Tales from his childhood, books of cowboys wandering wide open green spaces under an ever-burning yellow sun. Sharp-shooters tearing through a one-horse town. I read at random from dog-eared pages, and my voice falls in rhythm with the pace of the ventilator. I read until my words run together and the letters blur. I leave the room saddled with images of slim-waisted men riding fast down rocky cliffs. Not once do I look toward the bed. In the cold hallway, clock hands tick forward.

#

Under the fluorescent lights of the bathroom, I painted Steve's face. On his unlined forehead, I grooved deep creases and riddled his smooth skin with scars. With eyelash glue, I attached foam bolts from the costume store and smeared green paint from brow to chin. When I was done, Steve stood beside me, yesterday's monster in a pair of Wranglers.

#

At the 04 Lounge, Dwayne slides me a vodka soda. A bearded man leaning over the scarred pool table sinks red, then purple, then green. Dwayne asks me where Steve is, and I shrug. "He's home," I say. "We broke up," I say. "He left me." Dwayne pulls on one long black dread and pours two amber shots of Jameson. "To freedom," he says. "To freedom," I repeat. Our glasses collide. The whisky blazes down my throat and coils in my stomach like a viper.

#

Haphazard clowns and pairs of mini-skirted Lady Liberties gathered around the skeletal emcee as he announced the winner of the costume contest. When our names were called for best couple, Steve pulled me forward, and we were presented with a check for two-hundred dollars. The Marilyns and JFKs and Ketchups and Mustards and Berts and Ernies sighed, then the band wailed, the lights faded, and we were again on the slick dance floor surrounded by ghosts and flaking zombies. Frankensteve grinned at me, his black scars smudged.

#

I quit smoking three years ago, but, outside work, I bum cigarettes from old men and janitors. I lean against cold bricks and blow plumes of smoke that are snatched away by the wind. The smell of cigarettes clings to my hands and clothes and hair. If Steve were to wake up blind, my scent would be a stranger's.

#

“He would've woken up by now if he'd had that transfusion.” Two nurses in bright scrubs talk over Steve as they change the bandages on his arm. The trash bag sighs as gauze hits the plastic bottom. “He's going to wake up anyway,” Purple Scrubs says. The bed groans as Steve is rolled to rest on his side. “Not the same, though,” she adds.

#

I miss a morning call from Auntie Em and don't return it—the voicemail is long and breathy and edged with irritation. She is sure Steve is, at last, waking up. She is sure that I should be by his side. I turn my phone off and refill the tub until steam billows from the smooth surface. I prune until the water's cold again.

#

In Texas, the weather is fickle. By mid-November, the earth is alive, stalks of grass running tall and green. My parka hangs forlornly in the back of the closet. At Barton Springs, men and women with carnival food tattoos splash in plastic pools. Legs kick, trailing glistening bubbles. Although the water on my tongue is fresh, it tastes like home.

#

Auntie Em lends me a book from her home called *Conquering the Darkness*. It is full of helpful bedside tips like “Play his favorite music!” and “Take time to visit the hospital!” and “Remind him of his favorite things!” Steve’s favorite things: high-strung horses and large-breasted women. Chilled Coors Originals and the chant of a Sunday rodeo crowd. Nothing else comes to mind.

#

Outside the automatic doors, rain comes in fat drops and steam hovers over scalding pavement. As cars whirl by on the busy street and iridescent grackles mimic cries of fire alarms, I remember the silence of snow. Street lights flicker orange then burn red against the velvet night.

#

Panes jitterbugged in their frames as a heavy wind eased down from the north. Under my bare feet, overgrown grass scratched at calloused soles. Across the lapping pond, the red fires of Noman’s Land sparked against darkness. I closed my eyes, wanting to open them to the glinting chrome of a skyline, the vibrating asphalt of a never-ending highway. Wanting to forget the forks of dirt roads and the spit of the sea, the rust of lobster traps and the shadow of wetsuits swinging like noosed men. Me, wanting to slip from the dips of the island’s ridged spine.

And then I did.

WE WERE HERE

In a world without consequence, Joanie's every day would be champagne, hollandaise, cigarette. We recline in Adirondack chairs on Joanie's back porch. Joanie's mom's moth-rotted minks crown our shoulders as September unravels, whitecaps dart across the heaving ocean.

#

The ocean has knocked at our doors for years, chop chomping at the red clay of the cliffs. Neighbors' homes have sighed over the side—front yard, front stoop, front door. Overnight, my bungalow becomes waterfront property. Warm mornings, Joanie and I walk the beach pocketing the dull-edged glass of windows, the knobs of cabinets, the keys to a water-logged kingdom.

#

Joanie would rather nibble her toenails than listen to the Beatles, but, when Penny Lane jingles over the airwaves, the tight skin of her stomach ripples—thumbing the Hand Jive, skittering the Charleston, corkscrewing the Twist.

#

When I was a kid, summer meant jockeying the black-eyed horses at the antique carousel downtown. Joanie inks a list of the top three activities that remind her of being a kid since once she has it she can't be a kid anymore. "Like you were ever a kid," I kid. Times like these I want to tell Joanie about not having the kid. We coast into town for the last spin of the season, straddle the saddled backs of painted mares. The organ pipes crank, and we circle, fingers grasping for metallic rings. We cheer, pull gold again and again until we rack up enough free rides to gallop into next summer.

#

As August burned down, I gulped three pills and waited on the beach for my stomach to turn inside out. Sun-rotted boulders threw smooth shadows on cooling sand. In the parking lot, a flock of tourists applauded as the velvet Atlantic swallowed the sun whole.

#

“Ever think about the things our mothers wouldn’t have wanted us to do?” Joanie asks, and I shrug, remember tinker toy girls squeaking down the Spam-flanked aisles of Cumberland Farms toward the radiating cool of the dairy section. We stuffed purses with Reddi Whip bottles, then crab-walked past the acned kid at the counter. On the beach across from the A & P, we pulled breaths from the canisters, our lungs waxing. Then we were floating above the sand, and the island was maybe just something we had made up to whittle away the time.

#

Here’s the thing about growing up on an island: there is no road less traveled. Any path you choose, you’ve walked a million times. Anyone who tells you to turn every stone is naive—check twice, and you’ll find nothing more than dirt-crusting granite.

#

Ocean-licked fish bones, heads of arrows, the purple of Wampum. My closet is full of shoeboxes heavy with found items. In a dictionary entry, I once read the word *fossil* has nothing to do with dinosaurs or Pompeii—it’s just something taken from the earth. Taking from the earth is easy—knowing what to do with the pieces is the hard part. I add nails and slivers of dishes to the shoeboxes, imagine a future me archiving the spear heads and dinner chargers, the pottery shards and forks. “Here,” I will say, “all of this is ours.”

#

From my gatekeeper's desk outside the principal's office, I offer the pink-slipped kids commiserating glances. They ignore me, slide iPhones from pockets. My boyfriend, Mark, calls the kids screen-brained mouth-breathers as we barter sandwich halves on the bleachers, but he spends his free time dropping algebra beats. He runs rhymes in the shower, pairing sick injections with conic sections, and double cones with solid gold iPhones.

#

The invitation to Joanie's baby shower is pink, but she's still hoping for a boy. She says the island doesn't need another girl to drag out to sea. I've seen her, though, filling online shopping baskets with ruffled dresses and floral bonnets, and I know that she's all talk. Her shotgun husband sneaks items onto the registry daily. One Monday, baby begs a pair of size ten Gucci loafers. Tuesday, a chrome grill. Mark and I eye the aisles of block-lettered bibs at Brickman's: MY AUNT IS HOT and I SHIT RAINBOWS and I'M THE BOSS. Mark sighs, drops a pair of football-shaped slippers into the basket. "The kids are not going to be all right," he says. I couldn't agree more.

#

Joanie's great aunt kicks it, and we're black-clad under the steeped roof of the Catholic Church in Vineyard Haven. The priest is pondering great Aunt Mary's grace, while a jauntily-haloed Jesus grins in the glow of an orange sun. Although I did not grow up attending Sunday school, I can't help but wonder if those three pills earned me a free ride down the river Styx.

#

There's a joke about the island that Joanie likes to tell. Imagine this: two boys begin to argue. Unwilling to get in a fight himself, the smaller boy threatens to call his father to come lick the larger boy's dad. The bigger boy points out that the smaller boy's dad can't fight his father, either, because his dad is, in fact, the smaller boy's father, too. In this way, Joanie says, we are all brothers.

#

Joanie's husband works off-island, so I swing by the white-shingled farmhouse after school most days. In the four poster bed, Joanie balances Thai leftovers on her belly, snapping shrimp tails. I lay beside her, dangle a noodle into my mouth. Joanie asks me what will happen if she doesn't love her kid, and I don't know what to say. Times like these, I realize I can't tell Joanie about not having the kid. On the box set, a toupeed salesman guarantees the lives of hand-me-down cars. Joanie sighs, thumbs the surface of the pennies I pulled from the surf that morning. "There's nothing good on anymore," she says.

#

Here's the other thing about growing up on an island. It's not just the ocean knocking at your door—it's the past, too—and most people are breaking out the fine china. Remember last summer? The stripers thrashing in the water, just looking for a hook to bite? Remember that time at the party on the beach? The kegged beer stayed cool and flowed in ceaseless spurts, and you were tan and thin and thickets of leaves pulsed with the songs of perfectly-tuned birds? Remember?

#

Drunk on a dare and wanting to be a cool girl, I swallowed the heart of Joanie's pet python named Monty. In the kitchen of her parents' house, I winced through the butcher knife beheading, then gagged as blue blood ran red. Joanie's high school boyfriend pinky-crooked the pulsing heart into a shot glass then topped it with vodka. When Joanie presses my hands to her teeming stomach, I don't think of the clinic or the anemia test. I think of that blood-slimed glass and swallowing his heart, his heart beating.

#

Mark tells me I'm distant, and it's true. I leave campus for lunch, swarm with the kids as the last bell rings. I blame shitty service for missed calls. On an overcast morning, I am surprised to find him at my door. We walk the beach below my house, ocean flat and gnats rising in black clouds from mounds of seaweed. In the sand, I look for the shoulder of a buried shutter, the knob to a long-locked door. If I understand him, Mark wants something from me. He wants to understand me. When I say there's nothing to understand, he stalks, heavy-footed, through the wet sand. Soon the exhaust from his pickup joins the gray of the sky.

#

My landline rings, and it's Joanie calling me, calling me *Nina Colada*, a nickname she hasn't used since high school. She says she wants to knock another item off her list, and, an hour later, we are swooping into town, passing the shuttered windows of t-shirt shops, the barrels of last summer's Mint Chocolate Chip burning in the deep freeze. Joanie still has high school legs so guys still swivel on their bar stools as we walk into the Ritz. She nurses a glass of red wine and slots coins into the pinball machine. With a tube of bank-rolled quarters in her purse, she is ready to shatter her high score. I lean against the machine, watch the lights flare. Silver balls ricochet

from the paddles. But Joanie tires soon, and she can't break ten thousand, so we tab out and hit the street. On the ride home, she sleeps in the passenger seat, and although this drive feels like so many before, it also feels like a turning tide and so I take the roads slow. I stop at every sign.

#

Over winter break, snow chokes the island. The waves slush to shore and the splayed-wing bodies of loons fall from frozen power lines. I light candles and tease a fire, feel like myself as I moonwalk around the house in my parka and slippers, singing with the crank-turn radio until the arm falls off in a clatter of static. I sleep soundly as snow falls and in the morning I am grateful for the white, white silence.

#

Years ago, a snowstorm sapped power from the island for six days. When the ice was salted and power restored, we learned that the world continued to spin toward disaster without our help. In three day-old papers, we found photographs of towns that had been erased by the waves of a tsunami. We stared at the pictures of swollen bodies and land-locked tankers and were shocked to find that we hadn't felt a thing—not even a tremor. As news coverage continued to roll and the jarring images became just footage, we wondered if the island skated off the edge of the world would we even feel the drop?

#

When the phone lines are clear, it is not word of a tsunami that reaches me. At the hospital, Joanie is flying high from the painkillers and the epidural, so the nurses won't let her hold the baby. The baby is pink-capped and sickled in her father's arms, and, when she is passed to me, I hand her right back. Her face is her father's, a trick, I've read, of evolution, to keep gun-shy

daddies around. Although I'd never tell Joanie, I am jealous of this baby and all that is before her—a lifetime of turning the island's stones.

#

Here's one last thing about growing up on an island. Secrets are hard to keep. Stitch your mouth shut if you want, but your telltale tongue will nose through, anyway. Joanie's baby is three months now. She worms in her crib, the mobile I made wheels over her. Through the thick lens of sea glass, I imagine she sees us as misshapen creatures, floating in a sea of blue. The heat kicks on, the old radiators warble and, as the temperature climbs, so does the hot jealousy licking at my throat and I begin. I begin to tell Joanie about the clinic and the anemia test. The vein-nosed doctor and the week of nausea. She is silent and, in that silence, I imagine a thousand reactions. Joanie shaking her head. Joanie touching my elbow. Joanie asking me to leave. But then she shrugs. "There are all sorts of things our mothers wouldn't ever think we'd do."

#

Later, I walk the beach as the tide recedes. Ice slicks float, and, on the black rocks of the jetty, crabs skitter from the eyes of gulls. This is the best time of day to find fossils, when the ocean is pulling both ways. In the wet sand, a curve of brown, and, as I dig, I find the ridged shell of a giant horseshoe crab. On my knees, I dig deeper, grains of sand pressing into my nails. Freed from his sandy tomb, the crab's spider legs flutter as I hold him above the shore. Freezing water seeps into my boots, but I walk farther into the surf, struggling with his ugly weight. When I return him to the retreating waves, he will not thank me. On his shell, though, my fingerprints whorl, visible to anyone who would take the time to look, marking that we were here.

SORRY, WE'RE DEAD

January's days are numbered and still not a flurry of snow. In my father's backyard, lichen tree branches glow green through the cover of roaming fogs. Cherry blossoms explode then nosedive to wet earth, only to repeat the process next month. On the back porch, moths congregate around a single bulb, their hummingbird wings beat. Gradually, the groundhog realizes he may never see his shadow again.

#

A back-there neighbor called my mother at her house in Florida with the you-should-be-sitting-down-for-this-news and suddenly everything was different. My father was dead and I was on a flight to the island, while my mother played emotional hooky. As the landing gear unfurled from the belly of the plane, the brown of the island's curved shore bloomed to green woods, the red brick of the hospital. My ears popped and then the single engine was skating across the runway, the orange cones of a stone-faced air traffic controller flaring us to bay.

#

Before he died, my father and I arrowed knives at trees. Pull back the elbow in a right angle, grasp the point. Release with a straight arm and, before you know it, the blade is buried hilt-deep in bark and you're left wondering how anything could move so fast with so little effort.

#

Ten years is a decade too long to be gone but nothing has changed. The high school is the high school and the grocery the grocery and the bar the bar. What's changed is me and when I drive my rented Jeep into town for Lysol and Raisin Bran, I angle my ball cap low.

#

Tree bark grows over the metal sides of signs until NO PARKING becomes a weighted option of OR. Or what? Or else.

#

It takes time, Florida friends like to tell me. It takes time to grieve or it takes time to adjust or it takes time to move on. It takes me no time after returning to the island to start boxing up my father's study, to file his notebooks, to shred financial statements. In a desk drawer, I find decades of dog eared Farmers' Almanacs and remember being read passages of dire predictions. When younger me scrambled from the stories of locusts and boll weevils, my father would shrug. It takes a village.

#

Any island history book written before '99 clocks Peaked Hill as the second highest point on the island. That was before my father and his friends stacked the back of his pickup with mossed boulders hauled from some summer person's stone wall. The men groaned the truck to the summit, unloaded boulders until the sun shaved open the sky. Later, a newspaper article titled LOCAL MEN MOVE MOUNTAINS stated their motivation as a desire to "show Mother Nature who's boss."

#

My mother tried the lord when she found out about the affair. She tried spin class and yoga and a two-week jaunt to the Bahamas. She came back to the island of Martha's Vineyard with macrame bracelets and a crocheted bikini top and the decision that she wasn't willing to try anymore.

#

The hum of insects is loud and close, so I turn to the trees for space. In the drawer with the almanacs, I find drafting paper maps of ancient ways. Notes in my father's pinched hand read like a tour guide's script: BREATHTAKING OCEAN VIEW and STAGGERING CLIFF WALK and DELIGHTFUL NATURAL SPRING. In light sweaters, I hike his trails, waiting to corner the vistas that are promised to swipe the breath from my chest. But the trees have grown taller in the past ten years, and the cliffs have lost their footing, and, when I toe the steaming surface of the spring, the water scalds my foot and blisters cluster.

#

The woman my father stepped out with was not a brassy vixen. She was a schoolteacher and librarian, a woman whose class I was assigned for fourth grade. Under Ms. Henson's watch, we learned about prefixes and suffixes, the state bird and flower of Massachusetts, the loneliness of prime numbers. My mother believed that it was during this year that my father started moving from her, imagined illicit touches under kid-sized desks during parent teacher conferences, squares of the 5,000 plus piece puzzle our class had been working on jigsawed into the soft skin of my father's naked back.

#

If you believe the old story—and I do—we hand delivered the skunks to the neighboring island of Nantucket. On a dark night, some legendary islander motored his skiff the 38 miles across the Sound, accompanied by a bag of furred creatures mewling in the stern. After Peaked Hill, it was easy for me to imagine my father as this man. I could see him, black beanie, black Carhartt,

black gloves, captaining his Boston Whaler through the black night, his path tacked overhead in the burning light of white stars.

#

With the alimony cash, my mother snapped up a beach front bungalow in Pensacola. On the drive south, she promised me a sun-soaked life, blonde hair, a forever tan. At sixteen, I bought into it, bought baby oil, bought bikinis and when I swam in the warm Gulf it felt like more than an ocean was between me and the island.

#

Despite the almanacs, my father was not a farmer. He was a woodworker who specialized in cabinets, braiding wood into chessboard patterns that summer people went bananas for in the 90's. He didn't turn to the almanacs until after my mother left but, by then, he was looking for locusts everywhere.

#

Yes, I am lonely but give me the number of a person who can go home again. I'd like to tie up his phone line.

#

Time moves faster than knives and soon I've almost run out of paths to follow. I add my own notes to the maps, PRIVATE PROPERTY and OVERGROWN and DON'T EVEN BOTHER. By the time February arrives, the house is Pine Soled and boxes u-hauled and although I've already burned through a week of PTO, I still don't buy a return ticket. On the lawn, crocuses nudge precociously at green grass.

#

My mother calls often. She calls the island godforsaken and she calls me silly and, eventually, I come to resent her calls. After things unraveled between my parents, my father sold our house on the pond and moved to a studio off State Road. I try to imagine my father's life in this small space, climb the ladder to his lofted bedroom and peep the thick-leaved trees blocking the view of the road. I imagine him as a TV divorcee, chowing on scrambled eggs and toast. He sleeps in tees and jeans in front of the television, miniature newscasters and gameshow hosts mirrored in the bald spot on his head. In truth, there is no television and his pajamas are folded neatly under a pillow. If Ms. Henson ever dropped by, there is no sign of her. I've rifled every drawer, scoured grocery lists and out-of-date calendars for coded messages. Despite my pleas, the eggshell walls aren't giving up any secrets.

#

When my mother talked about the affair, she rolled her eyes to the skies and clasped her hands and lamented that walls couldn't talk. What she didn't know, though, or maybe forgot, is that if walls could talk they wouldn't have much to say—what they'd show would speak clearer than any over-eager tongue.

#

At Cronig's Grocery Store, I weigh tomatoes in my palm, sniff the rinds of melons. At the register, a girl I recognize from high school hands me change without a smile. In the parking lot, I sit in the jeep, eyeball the pollen rainbowing the windshield, realize that, when my mother and I split, the spaces we left behind sealed, and the island floated on without us.

#

Crowbar the panels from the walls at the Taylor house and release a bottle of Jack. Peel back the white ceiling at nine Marjo's way and blow the dust from a stack of stale love letters. Under the floorboards of the new post office, a coin collection tarnishes. My father explained it like this: spend every day of seven months building a house from nothing. Sand and saw and square and fuck up your hands and then one day the locks are changed and you're on the wrong side of the door. Wouldn't you leave something behind, too?

#

It wasn't just Peaked Hill. It was the midnight-cemented sea wall and the razed tree line. It was the flounder-filled bellies of Sea bass my father caught during the annual Derby and weighted with metal washers to ensure a take home of the biggest cash prize. It was my father trying to arm wrestle with Mother Nature when his own nature had left him high and dry.

#

In Sheriff's meadow, the grass runs knee-high. Red and blue and yellow breasted birds shrill from trees. Maples leak sap and, overhead, Vs of ducks serrate the sky. I follow the last of my father's mapped paths. On mossed trees, fading blue spray paint arrows me deeper into the woods. I ignore the orange NO TRESPASSING signs, walk the just-mowed lawns of summer homes. Behind curtained windows, I imagine the lives of people who move from house to house with the seasons, knowing the island only as a favorite chef, a secret beach, a tangy gimlet on an emerald lawn.

#

Yes, I am guilty. But give me the number of a person who isn't. I would love to tie up his phone line.

#

February unravels. On Valentine's Day, couples stroll the public beach in bathing suits, skin pinked from the yellow sun. Waves advance then white flag the shore, abandoning garlands of red and green seaweed. In sundried kelp, someone has spelled SORRY, WE'RE DEAD in man-high letters, beaming the message to the eyes of birds, the keepers of lighthouses, the flightpaths of airline pilots.

#

It takes me three trips to the library's parking lot before I make it to the front door. Inside, the library is not the library of my childhood. Small tables and chairs have replaced bean bags, VHS shelves house thin-spined DVDs, the one-time carpet now hardwood. I wonder what the carpenter who sanded these floors left behind. A button collection, maybe. A copy of Rambo. Me? I would dump the thumbbed almanacs, seal off their promises of drought and disaster. Let time do the work—pages rotted to dust, the glue of spines a rodents' smorgasbord. On ledges and low bookshelves, succulents in terra cotta planters stretch for sunlight. I'm not sure what I expect when Ms. Henson emerges from the back room of the library. Not the gray haired woman whose lips pucker from years of spent cigarettes. She is moving towards me, her clogged feet falling heavy on the hardwood. She is older than I imagined. Older than I can imagine being. Older than my father ever will be. With her hands pocketed in her cardigan, she asks if she can help me.

#

I can't help but floor it to Peaked Hill. After parking the Jeep in the gravel lot, I make the rest of the climb on foot. In trees, invisible frogs peep, vain Whippoorwills shrill their own names. The sun is dipping in the sky, the shadows of leaves pooling into dark patches. My lungs swell, and

my heart hammers in my chest. At the summit, the island spreads in all directions, grass and leaves and insects buzzing and sighing and dying in a single breath. The fast-sinking sun stretches the shadow of the stacked rocks until I stand in darkness. I knuckle a fist-sized rock from the peak of the stack, pull my elbow back and release. I imagine the rock snowballing, gathering grass and dirt and earthworms as it careens towards the ocean. When it hits the warm blue of the Atlantic, it will join the sandy bottom of the sea. Currents and salt will do the work of time until oceans cover land and new land rises from ocean and the rock is not a rock anymore but the key to a new island.

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