

Prefab Modular Homes, Nightgames, and Lake Tilson

by

Jenna Mertz

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Charissa Menefee, Major Professor
Brianna Burke
Janette R. Thompson
David Zimmerman

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2018

Copyright © Jenna Mertz, 2018. All rights reserved.

DEDICATION

I have been waiting all my life to write this dedication. And here it finally is.

To my family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
PREFACE.....	vi
PART I: PREFAB MODULAR HOMES	
PREFAB MODULAR HOMES.....	1
GHOSTS.....	10
CHRISTMAS FRIDGE	12
DAN'S WOODS	16
BILL.....	38
CROSS-COUNTRY	42
HEARTWOOD.....	50
PART II: NIGHTGAMES	
PART III: LAKE TILSON	
LAKE TILSON.....	84
PORTAGE LAKE.....	97
CITIZEN SCIENCE.....	116
MOON LAKE.....	125
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	
	155

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Charissa Menefee, who always—remarkably, impossibly—made me feel excited about my work. I do not know how you did it, but you made writing seem *fun*.

Sally and Doug—thank you for the gift of place. Without it, I would have no Lake Tilson.

I would also like to thank my cohort for their camaraderie and support. Your friendship made writing less of an isolating slog through hell.

Finally, Eric. You were always there, wherever and whenever that was. Each midnight draft, each early morning rant, each time I cried and screamed and swore that I would *never, ever* write again. Your name should be on this thesis as much as mine.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is comprised of essays, short stories, and a screenplay that explore growing up in the upper Midwest. *Prefab Modular Homes* is a collection of creative nonfiction essays that interrogate the loss of a childhood home. *Lake Tilson* is a collection of connected short stories exploring the fraught relationship between Teddy Olssen and Jess Koski, two best friends growing up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. *Nightgames*, a short screenplay, tells the story of Jess and Teddy's earliest encounter with a school bully.

PREFACE

I first identified as a Wisconsinite during the most sunless winter of my life. In 2015, I was teaching English in a small Norwegian town bound by canola fields and tall, dark pines. Homesick, lonely, and desperate for easy conversation, I dragged myself to a friend's dinner party and began chatting with a forceful expat from Omaha. I shook his hand, relieved to meet a fellow American, and offered a standard greeting. "Nice to meet you."

The Nebraskan, suddenly riled up, rumbled like he was shouting letters on a game show. "Oh you must be from Canada!" Shocked that he had (more or less) pinpointed my place of birth from four innocuous words, I blushed. Certainly I did not sound like my grandparents, whose demonstrative pronouns consisted of *dis*, *dat*, *dese*, and *dose* and who wedged blocky German words in between their English ones. Certainly I did not sound like my mother, who, drunk on Hungarian Christmas wine, spoke straight out her nose rather than through her mouth. But certainly I did, because a fellow Midwesterner discerned the sound all the way across the Atlantic Ocean and the Oslo fjord. I realized that I sounded like home, and for the first time, I embraced it.

My year in Norway invited me to recognize, celebrate, and interrogate what it means to come from the upper Midwest. Prior to teaching abroad, I never had the need to; I had lived in the same state in the same house my entire life, and it was a comfortable but boring default. The sale of my childhood home, however, ultimately forced me to confront my attachment to the past. My thesis, which consists of portions of two book-length projects, *Prefab Modular Homes* and *Lake Tilson*, and a screenplay for a short film, *Nightgames*, continues this exploration of home, family, and memory.

Prefab Modular Homes is a collection of creative nonfiction that reckons with the loss of a childhood home. Located between the urban sprawls of Milwaukee and Madison, I grew up in a

town in southeastern Wisconsin noted for its lakes, its conservatism, and its unblushing wealth. Where some of my classmates lived in lavish lake homes with yawning yards, mine was a Wausau Home: a prefabricated, modular house transported in two pieces on a truck from a factory in north central Wisconsin. My parents reviled the rotting roof, the leaky windows, the walls blighted by mold and carpenter ants, but I loved it: I loved our harvest gold refrigerator, the big bur oak, and most of all, the proximity to my extended family, who lived next door and helped raise me. The essays in this collection capture my impressions of home as a child, adolescent, and adult, and they examine the ways in which Norway gave me perspective on leaving.

In writing this nonfiction collection, I drew inspiration from Jo Ann Beard's extraordinary collection of essays about growing up in rural Illinois, *The Boys of My Youth*. Although the title suggests otherwise, Beard's essays explore her relationships with women, which buoy her during the many times her relationships with men fracture and deteriorate. Because I was raised by my mother and her sisters, these essays, like Beard's, contemplate my relationships with women, specifically my mother. My essay, "Modular Homes," which serves as the origin story of my house and presents the emotional and social geography of my family, is a nod to Beard's essay, "Cousins," which seeks to explain her close bond with her cousin.

Stylistically, *Prefab Modular Homes* is a collection of fragmented memories. Some essays are long whereas others resemble vignettes. I gravitated toward this form because like my thesis, my house was built in fragments. It also made the daunting task of capturing my family and home more manageable. Sherman Alexie uses a similar technique in *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*, a memoir that seeks to grapple with the loss of his mother. Alexie narrates the story of growing up indigenous and poor with a sometimes volatile mother in a fragmentary fashion: some chapters are poems, some are vignettes, and some, longer essays. Instead of writing a stylistically coherent narrative that chronicles his experiences with his larger-than-life mother—a near impossible task—Alexie

attempts to capture her through poignant fragments. Although my childhood was nowhere near as precarious as Alexie's, I employed the same strategy to grapple with the loss of my home—an event fraught with 25 years of memories.

In addition to exploring the emotional geography of home, *Prefab Modular Homes* also explores the physical geography of southeastern Wisconsin. My essay “Heartwood,” which illustrates the life and death of the old bur oak that grew in the middle of our street, is a direct reflection of my previous work in conservation and coursework at Iowa State. Prior to graduate school, I interned with the Nature Conservancy at the Lulu Lake Preserve and with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Lakeshore Nature Preserve, where I learned about oak savannahs, managed invasive species, and helped restore native habitats. At Iowa State, I took an urban forestry class that deepened my scientific understanding of the conditions surrounding tree maintenance and city planning. This course supplemented my practical and emotional knowledge of trees and tree communities, but it also piqued my interest in trees as individuals and social beings, an idea Peter Wohlleben explores in *The Hidden Life of Trees*. In the spirit of Wohlleben's book, my essay, “Heartwood,” ponders the possibility that one old oak in Wisconsin may have known another old oak in Iowa.

As a Wisconsin writer, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the impact of Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* upon this collection. I have read his book numerous times—in history, literature, and environmental studies classes—and am always struck by his ability to blend his knowledge as a naturalist with musings on the simple beauty of woodcocks and migrating geese. Leopold's essays, however, do not examine his personal life in tandem with the environment. Where I seek to examine the intersections of both, Leopold does not. In this sense, “Heartwood” is more elegiac and seeks to demonstrate the messy entanglements between humans and their environment.

The themes of home and rootedness to place also permeate the fictional stories of *Lake Tilson*. Set in northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, this short story cycle contemplates the complexities of adolescent friendship—its potency, its pleasure, its urgency, and its distinction from the relationships cultivated later in life— and explores how growing up in a rural, insular place both feeds and constricts the intimacy of such friendships.

The collection delves into the lives of Jess Koski and Teddy Olssen, two best friends growing up in the small town of Tilson in the Upper Peninsula. At a young age, Jess, honest and intrepid with an inflexible sense of justice, befriends Teddy, an introverted, tenderhearted boy with a love for plants, and they become inseparable partners. Between abandoned lumberyards and empty storefronts, iron studded hills and deep lakes, Jess and Teddy negotiate violence, sexuality, poverty, love, and loss. They witness as the town of Tilson, one by one, loses its young men to the dry, thirsty lakes by way of bravado, alcohol, thin ice, and suicide.

As the timbre of the friendship between Jess and Teddy emerges, so too does a portrait of Tilson: a rugged northern landscape marked not only by lake, pine, and snow, but economic struggle, intolerance, and loss. The collection ultimately interrogates the reasons why some return to the dying towns of their youth and explores why some, in an effort to escape the parts of themselves they do not like, never will.

While the idea for *Lake Tilson* hatched while I was an undergraduate, my graduate coursework in environmental literature and ecofeminism helped nuance my portrayal of the upper Midwest. Writers such as Jim Harrison have traditionally portrayed the Upper Peninsula as unforgiving, cold, and lonely—which it certainly can be. My stories, however, seek to demonstrate the consequences of branding an entire region as a relentlessly masculine space. How does the protagonist, Jess, who is motherless, walk through the world differently than her father?

How does Teddy, who is gay, walk through the world differently than Jess? And how do their identities collide with each other and with their environment?

While I celebrate the writers working to render an authentic, complex picture of the Great Lakes region, few write about the experiences of women. Nickolas Butler, for example, writes beautifully about Wisconsin in his novels and short stories but focuses primarily on the experiences of young men. As a result, I looked to women writing about wild places outside Wisconsin or Michigan. I read Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* to observe how she navigates complex family dynamics within a short story cycle. Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* and *My Name is Lucy Barton* showed me that quiet writing could be powerful writing, and Ann Pancake's Appalachia-set *Strange as This Weather Has Been* encouraged me to recognize how patriarchal structures hurt both women and men.

Nightgames, the short screenplay included in this thesis, also features Jess and Teddy and addresses the same themes of violence and masculinity echoed throughout the rest of *Lake Tilson*. It depicts another chapter of their childhood but in a more visual form. In contrast to the short stories, I hope *Nightgames* offers a sense of the "unsaid" culture of the Midwest. Call it politeness, call it passive aggression, but Midwesterners are skilled at silence, subtlety, and the art of not saying what they mean. Because most of this story is told through images and sound, I want readers to experience how Teddy and Jess read each other and the landscape without using words.

While *Nightgames*, the stories of *Lake Tilson*, and the essays of *Prefab Modular Homes* stand alone as complete pieces, the stories collectively represent only a partial telling of the story I ultimately want to write. When I first entered this MFA program, I did not plan to write such a multi-genre thesis. I intended to write fiction, but the loss of my childhood home forced me to become a non-fiction writer—and fast. My heart was in that story, and I did not want to abandon it for the sake of sticking to a purely-fiction thesis. Fortunately, both collections consider similar

themes and operate within similar settings; they dovetail and harmonize to offer glimpses of life in the upper Midwest. That being said, I do envision *Prefab Modular Homes* and *Lake Tilson* as two different books.

Ultimately, *Prefab Modular Homes* will tell the entire story of the sale of my childhood home, including an essay about moving-out day and a letter to the incredibly disagreeable and emotionless buyer. Although almost two years have passed, I am waiting for time and distance to enrich my understanding of this loss. Each time I return to visit my aunts and spy on the new neighbors, I am walloped with new feelings. Time will help me make more sense of them.

In its entirety, *Lake Tilson* will also feature stories that flesh out the middle of Jess and Teddy's story. The collection currently portrays their adolescence and Jess's adulthood—but not the middle, when Jess and Teddy both leave the Upper Peninsula. *Lake Tilson*, in its current iteration, gives readers a sense of where the two friends begin and where they end. A full cycle will include stories of their fraying friendship and their time away from home.

Lake Tilson is still seeking its point of view. Of the four stories, two use first person narration (“Lake Tilson” and “Portage Lake”) and two use third person (“Citizen Science” and “Moon Lake”). Inspired by the shifting point of view Junot Diaz employs in *This Is How You Lose Her*, I alternate between first and third to experiment with tone and distance. First person reflects the immediacy of adolescence, and third person captures Jess's reflections as an adult.

While an exploration and critique of the upper Midwest, this thesis, I hope, also serves as a love letter to the land and family that raised me. Wisconsin is an imperfect and messy place. The relationship between its people and its land is both exploitative and honest, both upsetting and heartening. But it is a place I love, populated with people I love. This thesis celebrates them. This thesis fights for them

PREFAB MODULAR HOMES

It is June when the cars first trawl slowly down our street. Necks crane out of windows; index fingers pop against cool, air-conditioned windows. *Look there, look at that.* A black and orange sign sits on our lawn. *First Weber. For Sale.*

When people ask my father who made our home, he doesn't know how to respond. He tells this to my mother. *What am I supposed to say?* He scratches the back of his buzzed head, picks at the scab that is always there. He is older now. He is almost free of it, this house, this money sink, *this piece of shit.* So, too, is my mother. He laughs an uncomfortable laugh. *Some guy on an assembly line?*

This is darkly funny for them. Emboldened by the prospect of leaving the house, they can finally laugh about its shoddy construction. I am twenty-five and leaving the only home I have ever known. This does not strike me as funny or fair.

Instead, I want to cup my hands over the ears of the house, hum loudly, tell it not to listen. *Shh, shh. I love you, I love you.*

*

Here is a scene. The kitchen is blue, the tabby is fat, and the table, strewn with papers. Around it, three hover. My dad has hair, my mother has big hair, and both have pillowy faces. My grandpa, Papa, settles into a hardback chair, his overworked joints stiff as the scrap wood he collects. *Jézus Mária,* he says in Hungarian, lowering himself. The cat watches. *Jézus Mária.* Somewhere, in another room, my aunt juggles my brother, John, colicky and young. She teaches first graders to read, but like hell she'd have one of her own. All her love will go to us.

I am here too. A kidney bean, furled like a crocus bud, floating in the soft hollow between my mother's hips. I am quiet; I am not much; but I am here at the table, here in the war room. Here is where it happens.

My grandpa wears his old blue Pabst sweatshirt. He is handy and can make things from wood by sight and feel. In his garage are Folgers cans of nails and sour cream containers of bolts. Behind the house, a collection of taken wood huddles beneath a blue tarp. Papa's father, a carpenter who only spoke Hungarian, made the display cases at the Wisconsin State Fair. When he took Papa aside and taught him, he was demanding and concise. *Frank, I'm only going to show you this once.* My grandpa leaned in close and memorized the rough grain of wood.

The business: the house next door. It went up for sale. My parents toured it, asked their questions, and learned it was a Wausau Home. My mother doesn't know. My father doesn't know. *Is it any good?*

Wausau Homes are made inside a warehouse with a roof that keeps out the rain and snow. Unlike a house built outside, the walls of this home were constructed in the absence of Wisconsin weather. No sleet, no wind, no ice, no sun. Instead, bare and dry, birthed in pieces on the factory floor. A Wausau Home comes into the world a product of a controlled inside environment. A prefabricated modular home. Papa thinks this is a good thing, and he tells my parents just as much. *It should be quality.*

My mother tells Papa that another couple put in an offer lower than the asking price, and she and my father cannot afford the full ticket. *What should we do?*

Papa turns to my mother. His eyes are dark and warm and his broad chest beats. This is before his aneurysm, before he began wandering, before he began forgetting. He can construct backyard sheds of scrap plank and stand so patiently, so quietly in the snow that chickadees peck the seed from his outstretched palms. He tells everyone he meets and my grandma each day that he has a massive brain, *a massive brain.* My mother trusts his every word.

Papa looks into the face of his youngest daughter, the only one with children. *Go full bore.* He smiles, close-lipped and generous. *I'll help you out.*

Silent and waiting, I rise and fall on the wind of my mother's womb.

*

Our home was constructed in two parts for easier transport. There is seam, a place of reunion, but I do not know where. Somewhere, there's a cleft. Somewhere, a scar.

*

One morning, my mother sees stains on the walls. Fingers of water extend from the place where ceiling meets panel, thinning to rivulets as they touch carpeting. She taps a long, dark spot. *Still wet.* The water is moving water, not just the aftermath of it. She yells for my father. *Come look at this!*

Our house is a damp house, and my parents know this. There is a dehumidifier in the basement and charcoal grey spots on the caulk between shower tiles. Each morning, my father takes a napkin and rubs the mold from the windowsill. The house has always been wet, but now, now it leaks. My father sizes up the stains and sighs. *Shit. It's the roof.*

Soon after the water, the ants arrive. The sun porch, the countertop, the alley between carpeting and baseboard heater. Dwarfed by the ants, jumping spiders crouch impotently in their corners, watching the cavalcade roll by. These are not driveway ants. These are big ants, black ants, ants that mean business. These are carpenter ants, the type that feeds on wet, rotting wood. They eat galleries into fallen logs and roof joists.

One night, my mother notices a line marching in a militant stream from the back coat closet to the china cabinet. *Like a choo-choo train,* she tells me. One after the other. United by a single purpose.

In her slippers and robe, she follows them back to the coat closet. She takes a flashlight, gets down on her knees, and parts the curtain of heavy wool coats. They are rough and old and smell of the mothballs buried in their pockets. She focuses on the queue of ants. *Where are you going?*

The beaded black line leads back and back, each ant tethered blindly to the scent of pheromones. My mother elbows and sends the spotlight back until she can't send it further anymore. And then, there it is: a small hole, in the seam, where wall meets wall. The ants slip quietly in, one by one, like patrons at a speakeasy. One by one, they disappear.

My mother sits back on her heels and stares at coat sleeves. John and I are young and asleep. The naphthalene burns her eyes.

Months later, the roofer forces a slight pitch to the nearly flat roof, hoping to prevent moisture from accumulating in the space between. When the roofer regrounds, he walks over to my parents. His boots are thick and bruised, true shit-kickers. He points up. *I found that nest for ya.*

My mother thinks of the back coat closet, the distance between corner and roof. Ants stringing back through intricate corridors, back to a soft pile of sawdust and eggs.

The roofer smiles. *Got rid of it for ya, too.*

*

Here is another scene. My brother and I are young and kneeling in the small space between wall and headboard, chunks of Ivory soap in our hands. John is thirteen months older than me. He is blonde with big gaps in his teeth and a public shyness he will never shake. I am only marginally more bold and my hair, a frizzed, golden wreath. Afternoon light filters down through the window above and warms our corner. This is the window our father wipes each morning for moisture and mold, but we do not know this, just as no one knows we are here and what we are doing. I drag a bit of greasy white across the back of the headboard and smile. John and I begin to draw.

Our canvas is the headboard of my parents' bed. The entire bedframe is wooden and has four posts that stick up like masts on each of the corners. My father's after-work clothes hang from the farthest post: grey sweatpants, a football t-shirt, a pilled-up sweatshirt. My mother's crocheted blue-and-white afghan drapes off the bed's foot. Unlike the shiny posts, the back of the headboard

is not finished. It is dry, matte, and raw, and I run my hand along the curved border of the headboard. This bed is the most regal looking thing in our home.

I pinch the soap to the wood. Big looping J's like fishhooks. *E, n, n, a.* My brother does the same. Big open J's like empty fruit bowls. *O, b, n.* We draw curves, clouds, and long, aimless lines that drift nowhere and then end. The more I press, the more the soap shrinks. I dig into the slice and draw until it is a nub, until it disappears, and flick it to the ground. White accretes beneath my fingernails, and I pick up another piece. Condensation leaks down the window into the grooves of the sill.

Eventually, someone comes in. My mother, my father. *What are you doing back here?* Sticky hands wrapped around white, crumbs of soap on the carpeting. Two young children look up. *What are you doing?*

My parents cannot get into the space—too large, too hipped, too fully-grown—so they usher us out. I remember this because I loved that place, because I felt so ashamed when they yelled at us and pulled me out.

I do not know how I thought of this. How I thought to slip into the Yellow Bathroom, the one with our only shower, and steal bits of still-wet soap from the harvest gold tub. How I thought soap not marker, soap not pen. It must have been me who made these decisions, as John liked garbage trucks and football and always followed, never led. It must have been me. I was the first to find that quiet space and slip through it easy, like a letter through chute.

*

It happens again. I am in high school, it is 6:30 in the morning, and I stand in the kitchen. My mother stands in the sun porch, a puffy black jacket pulled over her pilled blue robe. She is in slippers; fitful sleep pressed her hair into short, wild sheaves about her head.

In one hand, a hair dryer. She holds it up to the window and swivels it from side to side like a car wash fan. Water has begun to leak down the sun porch windows, and water, in December, turns to ice.

With a short fingernail, she chips it off. *Sbbk sbbk sbbk*. When warmed, some ice collects under her nail like grime. Some falls off in great slabs, like cliffs of glacier. When she de-ices one window, she shuffles along to the next, pushing hot, electric air into metal and glass.

She looks out the window at the deck her father built. Papa has long passed, and the fence has turned soft. The latch is delicate and falls apart like a loosely tied shoelace. To spruce the scene up, my father placed bronze colored caps on top of the fence posts, a tiki torch among the hostas. My mother was angry when he did that. She said it looked like trash.

My mother is preoccupied with this, looking like trash. This is why she lets no one but family into the house. This is why she won't let my friends see the basement. I have to remind my mother that we have it good. And we do; we really do. But sometimes, her shame seeps my way, too.

In the kitchen, my brother and I pack our backpacks for school. I stand by the door, mitten on knob. *We are going to be late!*

When John lumbers back into the bathroom, my jaw tightens, and I shred my lower lip with my teeth. I turn and watch my mother. The hair dryer chuffs and drones, and a pane of ice loosens. Tired and mute, she moves on to the next.

*

Each year, we pass the place of our home's conception. Driving on up to Up North via highway 51, we cut through Wausau and Rothschild. The odor of hot, toxic pulp permeates the car. The mash of woodchips and chemicals smells like sulfur and wet newsprint, and I shallow my breathing. My brother, always one to object to wetness and odor, wails *Dobbbb!* and pulls his shirt

over his nose. We cross the Wisconsin River. Red and white pines blanket the far off hills not shaved for skiing. This is paper mill country, but this is also prefab modular home country.

To my left, the landscape collapses into a sprawling concrete killing floor. Smokestacks like thick throats belch grey smoke into the air. Intricate pipes link buildings. It is grey, it is industrial, it is Mordor-esque. But this isn't Wausau Homes, not yet. It is Weston Power.

It's that warehouse, there in front. A massive building, controlled and deweathered, sealed up tight. I imagine chunks of house on assembly lines. Roofs. Tubs of cabinets. Unfurled floors. How big it must be, for a building to hold other buildings. How unmoored I feel, to see my home's home, before it became ours.

*

When I am young, before my memory sharpens and his fades, Papa builds things for us. The shed, the deck fence, the kitchen cabinets and basement shelves. He wanders back and forth between our homes in a white t-shirt and navy suspenders, talking to himself and looking for things to fix. All my mother has to do is ask. *Dad, can you make this? Dad, can you fix this?* She points to a coffee table, a cabinet, a spoon rack. She knows she is lucky her father can make anything. She knows she is lucky he lives right next door. In a bedroom beyond her sight, her children play on the floor.

Papa, who rises hours before the sun to read the paper and sip weak coffee, has been waiting all day for this. He likes to be productive. He likes to be busy. Even his short-lived retirement up north saw him building log homes with the neighbor. *Sure, honey. What do you need?*

My mother has something in mind. Something simple, something small. *Picture frames.*

Papa hitches up his pants and returns to his side of the yard. He selects scrap wood from beneath the blue tarp and dodders into the garage. Surrounded by jelly jars of nails and shoeboxes of

iron files, he cuts and sands and stains the wood that will define and protect photographs of his family. He cannot fix his daughter's house. He cannot buy her a new one. But this, this he can do.

Perhaps, during his quiet work in the garage, Papa reflects on the house. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps Frank Toth had miscalculated, had misjudged the Wausau Home. Perhaps it isn't a good house. Perhaps it is shit. For someone who has spent his entire life building quality things with his hands, it is hard to admit a mistake. But when Papa walks next door to give my mother the frames, when he sees his grandchildren laughing and drawing spidery webs of chalk lines between his driveways and theirs, he smiles. He knows it is worth it.

When Papa is seventy-six, he suffers an abdominal aneurysm. The doctors stop his heart and reroute his blood like cops in city traffic. No one thinks he will survive, but he does. I remember seeing the staples in his chest, frightened that the puckered flesh looked more machine than human. Papa survives, but he is not unscathed. A brain without oxygen, even a brain as *massive* as his, does not remain unchanged.

Papa begins to forget. On Sunday morning drives with my grandma, he loses himself out in Helenville, on a county highway near a dairy farm somewhere past Rome. He cannot find his way; he does not remember. When he manages to find his the road back hours later, he enters the house surly and in a huff. My grandma whispers to her daughters, *Frank forgot where to go*. They watch him forget other things: the day, the time, what he loves.

Papa does not make things anymore. He starts hiding them. Stamps, money, tools, junk mail. He squirrels away boxes of coins in the attic and basement, afraid that his nephews will steal them. This is what I remember most about Papa, his confusion. I am scared when he comes to our door at midnight, thinking it is morning, thinking his daughter wants him to fix things. When my mother says, *Dad, go back home*, her heart collapses in a heap. She remembers when he used to stand at her door, just like this, with frames in hand. Her father cannot fix this.

After Papa dies, my mother gives me his wedding ring. *For protection*, she says. *So he will watch over you*. I wear it always on my right hand and think about all the things this ring touched: the shed, the deck fence, the kitchen cabinets and basement shelves. I do not remember much of Papa before the surgery, but I can touch the things he built. I can see him in the house he made better. My home, this ring. These are the tangible memories I have left of a man I wish I had known better.

*

The night before the movers come, I cannot sleep. I rise from the mattress on the floor and stare out the window at my aunt's house. The gutters, the power lines, her sliding door. When the light is on, I can see right through it, can see her blue kitchen and the paper-strewn table. There is no light on tonight. My aunt went to bed a long time ago.

I lean my head into the wood paneling so many walk-throughs hated. *How can I thank you? How can I thank you?* My hands find the sill and I pinch it hard in a makeshift embrace. I cry.

This how I imagine it. Split along the living room, our home races down 51 on the back of a flatbed truck. The banner is gold and snaps in the wind: *Oversize Load*. Insects collide with wood paneling and splatter the joints and corners. It is 1978. It is a prefab modular. Unstoried, the house buckles down the highway, open to air for the first time.

GHOSTS

Standing between a snow blower and a pockmarked workbench, my mother peers out the tiny window of my aunt's garage. Folgers cans freckled with rust sit on the shelves; jelly jars of long, dark nails and tins of silver washers line the ledge of the window. Inside the garage, she looks across the lawn to our house, to the prospective buyers leaning out of their SUV and stepping onto the driveway.

As long as I've lived, someone from my mother's family has lived in the duplex next to our home. When I was small, it was my grandparents and Auntie Guy. When Papa and Munga passed, Aunt Joanne moved in. My mother, my father, my brother, and I—we were the anchors on the street, the ones around whom the grandparents and aunts orbited. We are now the ones leaving.

I walk through the pillars of light and dust to my mother in her dark corner. *You're sick*, I joke to my mother. *Look at you*. My shoes sketch over old oil stains and birdseed. I stand beside her and gaze out the window. I squint my eyes and look beyond the clothesline that stands between our homes. My aunt's t-shirts hang dead in the wet, hot air. Here we are, spying like nosy neighbors on our own home.

My mother leans closer to the dingy window, eyeing our property. *I need to know who is in my house*. She has done this all summer for each prospective buyer, this peeping from the garage. She wants to know for whom she cleaned the house, for whom she will clean up after. Sometimes, like this time, I join her and watch.

What we see are feet. All sorts of feet. Feet in white Keds and work shoes, strappy sandals. We see swollen toes, ruddy ankles and fleshy calves. My mother scrutinizes them, looking for dirt, looking for money. The rich old lake people with fat, pale feet, we hear them laugh and gag. They

know right away. Their shoes kick up the corners of the rugs and tell the realtor they hate the paneling, the bathroom, the home I lived in for twenty-five years.

My mother saws a thumbnail between her two front teeth and counts the bolts in a glass jar. I look at my bare, callused feet. We do not know yet that a woman in a white Lexus and black sandals will buy the house, that she will whittle its essence down to pet dander, bad countertops, and a harvest gold fridge. That she will wrinkle her nose and gut it like a fish.

In my mind, I walk the well-worn path from our driveway to the space between my house and the garage. There is the garden, the buckeye tree, the feeding spot between the spruces where Auntie Joanne throws soft loaves of Butternut bread for the raccoons. Decapitated milk jugs filled with dog shit—the shit of *our* dog—lean against the garage. The property is my aunt's, but we use it as ours. We hang our clothes on the same clothesline that my grandpa made from scavenged black metal pipes. In the summer, the cotton nightgowns lift like ghosts. Our fitted sheets, our shirts, our bras kick in the wind. Soon mine won't hang there, nor my mother's. The new house has no line. Instead, stands of dogwood and blue spruce define the property line.

The prospective buyers leave the house. They pull their puffy feet into the air-conditioned cool of their SUV and drive away. My mother looks at her watch. *Not even ten minutes*, she says. *They musta really had a laugh*. She eases out past the snow blower and workbench, across the lawn, pushing aside a damp, stale sheet.

After dinner, the thin, chemical waft of ammonia cuts through the hot, heavy air of our home. The sound of scrubbing. Mouth slung low, my mother drags a bristled brush along the linoleum floor of our kitchen for the third time this week. I watch as she pauses, sweat beading her back, then dips the yellow rubber gloves in the sky blue bucket, chokes the dirty rag, and begins again.

CHRISTMAS FRIDGE

When my parents finalize the sale of our home, it is August and I am away in a state that is not mine. Heat glues me to the wooden chair in my apartment kitchen, and I feel as if I missed a death I deserved to see. I call my mother.

“How did it go?”

She sighs. “Not so good.” I unstick a thigh and look out the window. A balding ash, a streetlight, the chipped siding of a purple house.

“What happened?”

I imagine my mother sitting amid the pillars of boxes in the new house, hand cradling her head. When she tells me the story, I imagine it like this.

*

It is during the final walk-through of our home when the buyer, a woman in her early fifties with a nose sharp as a slide rule, objects to the yellow fridge that stands in our garage. It upsets her. She looks at my father, who readjusts his baseball hat. “Can you move it?”

The refrigerator she detests is our overflow fridge. It is from the seventies and it is indeed yellow. It is the fridge that holds our surplus: my father’s homebrewed beer and my mother’s Dutch ovens of pea soup; the fish we caught last summer and the oatmeal cookies my aunt made last week. This is our Christmas fridge. It holds plastic-wrapped glass dishes of evergreen Jell-O and cheesy potatoes, tuna casseroles and buckaroo beans before they are served. It is out of place, defiantly stunning among the taupe and grey of garage boxes, work benches, and ratted up shoes. Vibrant and lonely, like a canary singing vibrato to an empty room.

The Christmas fridge is all that remains at our home of twenty-five years. It does not fit in

the garage of the new house. My father offers to move it to the end of the driveway for the garbage men in their green truck to pick up. The buyer objects.

“I don’t want it sitting out there like that.” She pinches her face, shaking away the unthinkable of it loitering near her home. She turns to her realtor, Flora, for validation. “It’s *harvest gold*.” Flora smiles.

Flora, my mother tells me, is in the million-dollar club. She deals in real estate with seven figures and clients, like our buyer, with speedboats and investments. When I first met Flora, she wore a floral dress and smiled at our dog the way one does a screaming child in church: exuberantly, to hide distaste. She did not pet our dog, and the buyer complained about the dander. Their interest in our prefabricated modular home baffles us. I fear she will raze it, scrape it off our wooded lot, and build anew.

My father picks up his baseball hat and sets it back down on his head. He knows this is the final heave, the final push. My father is Midwestern so he holds his tongue and remains patient. “Well, I guess I will have to get someone to pick it up.” He lifts his baseball hat and sets it back down again. I know he estimates the cost in his head, his stomach tightening. More money to sink into a home that is no longer his.

Our realtor, Kevin, has had enough. He bites back. “You know what, my brother has a truck. We can pick it up this weekend.” He looks at my parents. The bags beneath his eyes are basset-like.

On numerous occasions, Kevin has told my parents that they are being taken advantage of, that there is a better buyer and a better price. But Kevin respects my parents’ need to sell the house. My parents cannot afford two houses at once—our old home and the new— and this woman was the only person to put in an offer.

Kevin turns to the buyer, lips taut. “Will that work for you?”

She nods. Flora adds, “Perfect!” Her earrings glint like guillotines. Another deal, another steal.

*

In winter, the Christmas fridge enables our indulgence. My mother, frazzled with the self-imposed task of completing all the holiday cooking, sends John or me outside to ferry plastic wrapped dishes back and forth from fridge to kitchen. *Go get the Jell-O. Put the Jell-O away. Go get the cake. Put the cake away.* When I open the door, I hold my nose against rush of chilled plastic and onions. On the nights when the temperature drops below zero, John and I dance out, bare feet nearly burning on the cold concrete.

In spring, my brother and I ransack the fridge after an evening of summer driveway hockey. All of eight and nine years old, we grab cold cans of Jolly Good orange soda and press them to our sweaty brows and cheeks. We pop the tops and glug as long as we can stand it, the carbonation burning the back of our throats.

In summer, the Christmas fridge becomes the beer fridge. In June, my father stands under the eaves of the house by the coiled green hose and brews beer. IPAs, stouts, Weiss beer and wild rice lagers. He makes two-dozen bottles and carefully arranges them like bowling pins at the back of the fridge. When I am thirteen, I refuse to let my Mormon best friend get root beer from the Christmas fridge because I am ashamed of all the alcohol. Her family does not drink. My family—good Wisconsinites, all of them— does, and quite a bit. If she sees the inside of the fridge, I’d have to confess, I’d have to come clean. *We drink beer. And we make it, too.*

In autumn, a calico cat with a little bell around her neck sleeps atop our fridge each night. *Peepers*. She is a neighborhood stray who leaves her home because she does not like it, because her owner has better things to do than care for cats. When I go outside to grab a bottle of water, Peepers coos and stretches from her perch atop the fridge. My mother makes sure Peepers is warm

and feeds her the best tuna money can buy. *Hey, Peepy*. She eyes me and resettles in the plush cat bed, content as a monarch upon her throne. The fridge continues to hum as the November winds agitate the leaves outside.

Peepers knows this better than us: here is the best home she has ever known. I find no reason to object.

*

I sit in the kitchen with a hollow gut. My mother sits in hers, observing a wreckage of boxes. Her fridge is new. Mine is used. Neither is harvest gold.

I think of my father. He will do it. He will tip our fridge onto a dolly and haul it out of the garage. He will wheel it to the end of our driveway where it will sit like a hitchhiker from the seventies: a relic, awakened and blinking in the new sunlight. Kevin will come back with lined eyes, with his brother, and grapple with it until it flops over into the bed of their truck. And then they will cart it away, a tired beast, humped and spent, a cold fridge rotting in the warm sun. I only wish I were there to help.

I unstick my other leg from the chair. A cool breeze comes through the window and licks the underside of my thigh. My mother and I are silent on the phone. The cicadas, my Greek chorus, sound like dying motors in the night.

DAN'S WOODS

When the machines come, when the orange flags hashing theirs from ours bloom like bloodroot along the property line, I am twelve or thirteen and overly concerned with school. Jazz band, grades, how to suck in my stomach and stop myself from sweating too much. At 6:15 in the morning before I meet the bus, I sit on the bed and count my folders to make sure they are all there. *Spanish, social studies, language arts, science, reading, math.* I check to see that my homework is perfectly correct and tucked inside the folders, that I have my calculator and pencil case and cold lunch. I am anxious about perfection and soon, about loss.

I walk on my knees across the bed to raise the pull-down shade on my window. I pull too hard and the white vinyl shoots up like jumpy cat, coiling tightly at the top of the rod. *No!* I scramble to fix the shade, but I can't; I'm too short. I will have to tell my mom that I screwed it up, again. Weak daylight filters through the lidless window, and I look out at Dan's Woods.

Clawed machines hunch like sleeping beasts in the lot behind our home. In the day, these machines gut the woods, turning over dirt and clearing trees. Men lay chainsaws into maples, walnuts, thickets of boxelder trees. At night, they leave and the machinery rests. That's when my brother and I come home from school and make lists of what's missing: our cauldron stump, the trees we climbed, the entire stand of rogue asparagus and the good half of our garden. All eaten under the promise of future development.

My mother comes into the bedroom, looks at me, looks at the shade, and then sighs. *Move.* She heard the white vinyl suck up the window in a loud shudder and knows that I pulled too hard. I kneel back to the bed and watch her wrestle with the spindle, trying to peel the shade back down. I hug my backpack to my body. *I'm sorry.*

She unfurls the roll, not looking at me. *Call me if you want to pull it up.* She fixes it, but before tugging the shade halfway down, she gazes out the window. She sees it too and makes a disgusted grunt. *Look at that.* Beyond the bald lot, across the street, Lake Nagawicka roils in the November wind.

My mother leaves my bedroom and I follow her to the kitchen, where I slip on my jacket and whine at John to finish breakfast, to wash his face, to be ready so we *won't be late for the bus.* He lags purposefully, so I sling on my backpack and walk into the cold and up the dimly lit street. Behind me, Dan's Woods empties, a blank space on the horizon. My back wilts. The streetlights turn off. The bus huffs down the road.

When we are at school and when my mother is alone, she peers through the bedroom windows and watches the machines stutter and plow through the woods. She sees an index finger between her front teeth, watching them tear into the trees her kids loved. She looks to the orange flags and dashes of neon paint denoting gas lines and property boundaries. *I want to leave, I want to leave.* But this will not happen for another thirteen years. In the meantime, the small house gets smaller.

*

The city said that the lot was unbuildable. Triangular and wedged like an unwanted side dish between our backyard and my grandparents', the property was deemed too small and too oddly shaped to support a house, a driveway, a yard. It is a shy lot populated with boxelder trees, beer cans, and stacks of firewood. John and I spend our Saturdays roving the land, collecting lime green walnuts, the bones of small animals, and jay feathers. When we head back inside for dinner, black pitch stains our hands like coal.

Dan owns this lot. He lives a few streets down in a white house with an above ground pool and worked construction for Papa long ago. His stomach is forcefully round and a beard colonizes

his face like moss on fallen log. Dan is not uppity about lines and boundaries, so he lets John and me run around this lot as if it were our own. We call it Dan's Woods.

When Papa offers to buy the lot, Dan shakes his head and refuses. It isn't for sale. *It's for my son.*

Papa surveys the woods. Even if Dan's son wanted to build, it would be a strained, strange fit. Papa was offering to buy scraps. *You sure?*

Yep. Dan crosses his arms and looks like Brutus from *Popeye*. It is his final answer.

All right. We don't know much about Dan's son other than the fact that he is not the entrepreneurial type, that Dan complains about him. Papa meanders back over to his house. *Well, if you're ever interested in selling, I'm interested in buying.* Dan returns to his.

One day, a man with a dark chinstrap beard plants a black sign on Dan's property. *Rob Miller Homes.* The man is burly but soft and moves like he is chasing business deals. Once perhaps, he kneeled on tile and made his own homes. Now he designs, yells, pushes.

Rob Miller Homes have stone turrets and lake views, decks that yawn out like landing strips. This house that he builds on this small triangle lot with a walnut tree will be no different. Rob Miller goes big, or he goes home.

*

When the house goes up, it is enormous and blue and looks like a fat cat sitting in a small box. Oversized, smug and entitled, sure of its fit. The unbuildable lot, it turns out, was buildable, but only for the right people with the right amount of money. Rob Miller was the right type of man.

We distract ourselves from the palatial construction with a new dog, a young collie with close-set eyes and piercing bark. When we take her for walks, people on the street chirp *Lassie! Lassie!* and reach for her with outstretched hands. They pet the white diamond atop her head and look at us with eyes of wonder. *What a good dog.*

But Ivy is not a good dog. Ivy is a dog with problems. A runt collie, a no-Lassie collie, a can't-save-Timmy-but-sure-as-hell-can-bark-at-him collie. She is a rescue because my mother believes in rescuing; she is a collie because my mother has always had them. Ivy's previous owners caged her alone in a dark garage for hours on end and Ivy, we soon learn, has not forgotten this.

When I leave the house, she charges the door, barking and cornering me. *Arf! Arf! Arf!* I want to bark back, *I'm not leaving! I'm not going anywhere! I'm just going outside!* Sometimes I get in her face and yell these things through gritted teeth. When I leave the house, she crowds my back and barks, and just as I cross the threshold, nips the fat of my buttocks. I try to remember that she does not like it when people leave, that centuries of corralling sheep across the Scottish Highlands compel her to keep the herd together. She is haunted by both trauma and instinct.

But I am impatient, the bite is painful, and I don't like to be punished for leaving my own home. I whip around and yell into the closed door. *Damn dog!* On the other side, Ivy continues her campaign.

*

It is Sunday and my father is shirtless and defiant on the back deck, the newspaper tented before him in the hot June air. This morning, he boiled eggs, went to church, balanced the checkbook and made a big, loud sigh in the kitchen. Now, husky gutted and ready to relax, he is determined to convince the prospective buyers that the prospective neighbors are complete and utter trash.

Arf! Arf! Arf! Our dog fights the end of a long black rope in the backyard, running circles around the white pine. *Arf! Arf! Arf!* Her bark cracks and whines and lifts through the neighborhood like a toxic gas.

Ivy! My father says this half-heartedly and only to add to the noise. He knows that scolding won't work, that nothing short of duct tape could stop her from barking and dancing. He takes a

slug from a pint glass of chestnut colored beer and pitches his eyes sideways toward the house. He doesn't see the prospective buyers yet but they're there, inside, padding through dark spaces blasted cold by central air. He sets the glass back atop the stack of unread sections, shakes the newsprint and continues reading about the rest of the world. *Arf! Arf! Arf!*

I walk barefoot onto the hot deck and hop to a square of shade where the wood is bearable. *You got the Cue section?* I dance on my feet, standing above him. His paunch spills over the front of his frayed cargo shorts, hairy and white. This is not usually a look I would advocate my father cultivate in public. But today, it is a most excellent look.

He looks up at me and then nods at the stack. *It should be in that pile.* I lift his beer and peel back the pages of paper and department store ads. *Business, Sports, JC Penny, Target, Local.* The Cue section is the arts section: recipes, interviews with authors, critiques of concerts and theatre productions. I don't read the Cue section for those things; I read it for the restaurant reviews. I know every restaurant in Milwaukee: the places that are good enough to go to and the places too good for us to go. In December, I will go to a good enough one for my birthday, and all my aunts will come, laugh too loud, drink and allude to the type of errant, wayward youth I wish I had. I will be both happy and embarrassed, especially when they leave the nice restaurant and light up a smoke.

When I spot the Cue section, I extricate it from the pack, shrugging off a Sears ad and a Fleet Farm fold-out. I steal the full-color comics spread as well and leap back over to the screen door. I turn around. My father's face is pinched and serious, like it usually is. He licks a finger and flips a page, making a wet spot on the newsprint. Numbers, letters, war and money, reading adult things about the end of the world. He takes a sip of beer.

I can't believe you're doing this.

What? He turns to look at me, peers at me through his glasses. *Reading the paper?* A page ruffles in the breeze.

Arf! Arf! Arf! Ivy reawakens, loud and hell-bent. A man walks an arthritic retriever up the road and Ivy sees him through the trees. A storm of barking. When the prospective buyers exit the side door, my father stands and stretches, belly toward the blue house. *I-yy! Cut it out!* He smiles.

My mother does this too. On a late afternoon, after mowing the lawn, she takes a carbonated water, our uncooked dinner, and the dog to the back deck. She pulls out the Smokey Joe grill from beside the box of marigolds and lifts the top. She sees: grey coals, pallid dust, char clumping the grates like mascara. She looks up: a big blue house, a big long deck, and small, wan bushes. She sits here to remind them how close they are, how close they'd be. Ivy sits in the grass like a nice dog.

My mother fills the grill tub with fresh briquettes and soaks them in a sweet chemical stream of lighter fluid. Flicks a match; the *foom* of fire.

She slips her feet out her sandals and sets them on the strappy tops. Thin skin drapes over the tendons, revealing the delicate architecture of her feet. They are tired and soft, these feet, flecked with grass and dirt. I work half as hard as her and yet mine are quilted in thick calluses—tough and ugly. Each night she scrunches up on the toilet seat and rubs lotion on her feet, covering them with socks. These are things I notice about my mother now: that she cares about these things, and I do not.

When the grill is hot enough, she forks three pork steaks onto the grates. The meat hisses. She leans back into the plastic canvas chair and lets the sun warm her bones.

When she was young, my mother did not have a lake. She had farms. When she was growing up, her corner of Waukesha was the sticks: dairy cows, alfalfa, blue-spotted salamanders. In the mornings, she ran across the field to clean out the silver water dishes of Farmer Klein's cows and combed their fifty warm bodies. She fed bread and milk to rangy cats on hay bales and watched him call the cows in at night. *Ca-boss! Ca-boss!* Heads nodding, they plodded across the pasture and back

into their own stanchion. My mother did this because she wanted to, because she liked the feel of their wet velvet muzzles, the way the big cow heart beat under her dirty palm.

She tells me these things when we pass her old home on Dona Vista Drive in Waukesha. She points out what used to be and what remains. There: the cedar trees. There: the large cement planters that Papa made. *See? Quality stuff.* She shakes her head when she notices that they are empty and without flowers. *These people just don't give a shit.* We drive down the hill and she sweeps a hand to show me where the cows used to be: a Chinese restaurant, car dealership, mega church and laser tag arena my friends and I went to once. *Yeah, yeah.* My mother turns the wheel and we merge back into the traffic of a four-lane highway I've always known. *None of this used to be here.*

It's time to check the meat. My mother leans over and lifts the black, orbbed lid of the Smokey Joe to examine the pork steak. Smoke and heat fan into her face and burn her eyes. *Getting there.* She dumps a fat stripe of barbecue sauce along the bone and smears it in with a brush. The meat turns mahogany.

She straightens up and regards the backend of their house. *There they are.* No fence, no trees, just walls wide and tall like a high school scoreboard. My mother slides her thumb along the groove in the handle. She could fling this brush and hit their house, could splatter sauce along its broad back and watch it creep down the dusty blue siding like fresh blood in the bright June sun. All it would take is a lob, a pitch, a light toss. *It would be so easy.* She bounces the brush on her smooth knee and then sets it on a paper plate.

My mother lifts the lid and checks the meat again. *Almost done.* She tips the bottle of sauce and a clot tumbles out, hissing as it rolls off the meat and through the grates. It blackens in the bed of hot coals.

Ivy is still quiet, her nose bobbing skyward, picking scent from the air. She looks at my mother, stands, and barks. Her puffy tail waves. *Oh, quiet.* My mother can almost hear it, on the other side of the big blue house, the sound of waves, people, lake.

*

Her name is Theresa. She has sporty blonde hair, two sons, two dogs, a husband and a white Hummer that ploughs around town like a jacked bull. She does not work, he does, and her sons are younger than John and me. I never see them, but I imagine they hole up in the finished basement playing video games with guns and strippers.

It's the Bush years and I am fourteen. Gas is not cheap, nor was the giant blue house on the unbuildable triangle lot. But Theresa bought it, rolled up with her family in the white tank we'll come to identify and avoid for the next few years, and became our neighbor. Eventually, they install two fences: the first, tall and brown and the second, invisible and electric.

One day in spring, my mother kneels on a green foam mat, weeding the ring of red salvias around the statue of St. Francis near our garden. She puts water in his cupped hands for the house wrens to come and drink. *Arf! Arf! Arf!* Ivy lunges toward the high school boy running up the street. She is tethered to a big corkscrew in the ground near the driveway, tail fur collecting blue spruce needles. *Arf!* We cannot keep her inside when we are out; she paces and barks, following our movements from within.

Theresa rounds the back of the house and walks to where the fence stops. This is where our garden used to be. I used to stand there and shake the tall spires of asparagus, dropping orange beetles from the tips. Now, their house is so close to our lot line that Theresa stands only feet from my mother.

My mother sits back on her heels and holds the three-clawed hand tool in her lap. She feels compelled to say something to Theresa, who is within whispering distance.

Beautiful day.

Theresa looks at my mother and stretches her mouth into something like a smile. *Isn't it? So nice to be outside.* She keeps walking along her house, hair jaunty. Her Doberman prances after her like a silent deer.

Arf! Arf! Arf! Ivy sees the Doberman. Ivy goes berserk. Hopping, dancing, barking. My mother walks back over to Ivy, spooling up the black plastic rope as she goes. *Sorry about that. She's not mean. She just gets excited seeing everyone.* This is true. My ass is the only thing she has ever bit.

Theresa is not amused. *You know you can get a collar for that? For the barking.* The Doberman is still and undogly at Theresa's side, eyeing my mother like a smug oligarch, eyeing her like a cat. I have never pet that dog, nor has Theresa ever invited anyone to do so.

My mother reels in Ivy, shocked by her suggestion. *Oh. I don't know if we'd ever do that.*

Theresa puts her hand on her hips. *They work pretty well. Not all of them are shock collars.*

My mother looks down at Ivy, at her lolling tongue, at the thick ruff of white fur around her tender neck. If you shaved her, took her down to the skin, there wouldn't be much neck there at all. She looks back up at Theresa. *Ivy's a rescue so she's got some problems.* My mother unclips the rope and hauls her toward the garage. *I'll just take her inside.*

Once in the house, Ivy runs to the water bowl and slurps. Theresa can electrify her lot and her dogs. My mother brushes the dirt off her legs and goes back outside. Ivy charges the door, barking. *Arf! Arf! Arf!* She won't do it to hers.

*

Here. Take these. My mother hands me a heap of damp, cold clothes. *Clothespins are in the garage. Bring the dry stuff in.* I grab the old red bucket and head outside to hang a new batch of shirts on the line.

When I drop the wet heap on the cheap vinyl chair, I marvel at the clothes already hanging on the line. My bra. My brother's boxers. My dad's jockstrap. My mother clipped these things on the line closest to the big blue house. There it is, our underwear, blowing in the neighbor's faces like an American flag in a strong breeze.

I am surprised she did this, hang her white bra and cotton panties like she didn't care. My mother does care about these things. My mother is vain. She asks me to get the mail when she has not yet put on makeup. She shaves her legs every day with the fear that she will have a medical emergency and the EMTs would see her unconscious with hairy legs. She hates public speaking. She hates revealing what is vulnerable, what is private.

Hey, Auntie.

My aunt walks over, carrying a stack of floral sheets and cereal box. *Hey, honey.* She dumps a bag of stale cereal between the trees for the raccoons to eat and begins to hang the sheets. Her bras face the road, twice as big as ours. She smiles and sings.

Theresa and her family live next door for a year before they leave and put the big blue house up for sale. A new job, a relocation. We never see the white Hummer again.

*

New people buy the big blue house. Their names are Paula and Jim; one a master gardener and the other, a lawyer. They have grown kids and run triathlons and install a big, stone fountain in the corner of their yard. It blocks their view of our shed.

We walk past the house at night, my father and I and the dog, to get some fresh air. The façade is panoramic and grins from lot line to lot line, windows bared like polished teeth toward the road. Golden light pours and floods the driveway. My father and I slow and stare unabashedly into the guts of the house. We see it all now: the big screen TV, the long hallways, the finished basement.

It is all lit up, all on display. I think of my father tilting his head into my room, chiding me about the lights I left on. *Jenna, is there a ghost in the bathroom?*

Ivy barks and pulls the leash taut. I scan the fortress, looking for bodies moving through the rooms, lounging on couches. Nothing, nobody. The immaculate corridors beam wantonly into the damp night.

Ivy lunges at a rabbit and pulls my father toward the public boat access to the lake. They head down to the pier jutting into Nagawicka. I look back at the house, and I almost see it. There, the walnut tree. There, the gravel pit. Our garden, the raspberries, and somewhere, behind it all, our home.

*

I am in high school. My friends have fancy houses with pools and two stories, big yards and furnished basements with flat screens and Ping-Pong tables. They show up on warm nights in the cars their parents bought them and kidnap me. Some nights, like tonight, they warn me.

We're coming to get you.

Yes, we are.

Almost there.

They come to steal me from my trigonometry homework, from my compulsion to stay home on Friday nights and study. They help break my habits; they make me socialize. I don't tell them this, but I like being taken from here. The wind and the crickets and the anticipation make my skin buzz. I like being wanted.

Most of my friends are boys, but not cool boys. They are animators, skinny runners, kind boys who film movies with cousins in the backyard. They are arrogant clarinetists and doctor's sons, writers with russet hair and Catholic guilt. The boy with the neat laugh and buttonquails has been my best friend since middle school. Evan is the reason why I know some of these boys, although I

cannot give him all the credit. I have always gravitated towards friendship with men, although I cannot say why. I know that the friendship is comfortable, that I can talk to men better than women, that they make me laugh and compare less. Men are unselfconscious in ways I admire.

My friends do not come into the house. My mother permits only Evan into the kitchen, where our fat, sour cat sits on a wet towel, passing judgment like a spoiled child king. She allows Evan to enter only after profuse apology.

If my friends were to come inside, this is what they would see: wooden doorways foiled to shin height, dish towels on the floor, a baby gate and an enormous piece of transparent plastic jutting like a surprise from behind the fridge. The foil prevents the cats from clawing the woodwork; the dishtowels soak up the animals' slop; the plastic and gate contain the dog at night. They would see my mother holding Ivy back, trying to laugh at it all.

At my desk, I receive a message on my phone.

We're here.

I dog-ear the page of my history textbook and cap the orange highlighter. It's Mauer. I imagine him in the driveway, eyes on the house, the house I am currently in. I feel bare.

I won't come out.

Stop working.

I need to work. The white shade of my window lifts in the breeze. I close the book.

In the living room, my mother sits on the couch in her blue robe with wet hair. One leg is curled underneath her and she is watching reality TV. I tell her my friends are in the driveway.

Mauer's here.

She turns toward me, speech thick with a plastic mouth guard. *They can't come in.* The guard is yellowed and dingy and darkened in the places where she grinds her fillings. I have a mouth guard

too, although it's fresher and thicker. Even sleep, it seems, does not keep the women in my family from clenching and milling their teeth to dust.

The doorbell rings. Ivy scrambles to the door. *Arf! Arf! Arf!* She careens through the living room and back to the door. *Arf! Arf! Arf!* Living room, door. Living room, door. This is her racing loop; this is our regular Dale Earnhart. My father leans back from the computer, emerging from his alcove like an angry woodchuck. He attempts to stop the cycle.

Ivy! Get over here! My father stomps over to Ivy with his money face on: pinched forehead, glasses low, focused and grumpy. He raises a thick index finger into the air as a warning, as if he were speaking to a naughty child. *Ivy.* The dog pays no heed and reverses direction.

My mother looks at me again, damp and plain. A woman with fried hair and a spray tan cries on the TV screen. *They're not coming in here. You better go out now.* My mother's eyes are bare and unremarkable; water mats her bangs to her creased forehead. She does not like anyone seeing her without make-up in the same way she does not like anyone seeing the inside of our home. Both are things to hide and shame, both are things she wishes she had the money to change.

Fine. I walk past her on the couch and into the kitchen, where I lean against the doorframe and slip on my sandals. Ivy corners the errant member of her flock.

Arf! Arf! Arf! She skids into the entryway and crowds me into the door, brown eyes rolling. Her lower jaw, white and wet, quivers with spit.

Somebody get Ivy! I stand with my hand on the doorknob, unwilling to leave and risk a nip in the ass. I clench my jaw and count the seconds. *One, two, three, four.* I wish it were simple to leave home. I wish it weren't such an ordeal.

My father stomps around the corner, finger raised higher, straighter, with increased agitation. *Ivy!* He grabs her by the ruff and hauls her backward from the front door. *Stop it!* The collar strangles a bark in her throat.

My mother walks into the kitchen, slippers scuffling on the linoleum. A look to the dog, a look to me. *When do you think you'll be back?* She worries about deer, about drunks, about semis slipping over the centerline. My mother doesn't worry that I will do something stupid; she worries that others will.

Probably midnight or one.

She crosses her arms over the pilled fleece robe. *What'll you be doing?*

I lean into the door and sigh. *What do you think?* My mother knows that we will watch movies in a basement, that we will throw Goldfish at each other and at most, tell dirty jokes and bluster about alcohol and sex. My friends and I, we are all bluff. She knows that I am begrudgingly good.

When she responds, her speech is garbled and her teeth, discolored by the guard. *Well, be safe.*

The lines in her forehead deepen. When I turn twenty-five, I will recognize the same lines furrowing my own small brow and pull at them like a rumpled picnic blanket, unable to make them smooth. My mouth guard will be battered and blackened like hers.

But for now I am seventeen and unworn. *I will*, I say, knowing she won't sleep until I return, until she hears me cross the threshold and lock the door.

My father readjusts his weight over Ivy and looks up at me. As usual, his concerns are more practical. *Turn off the outside light when you get back.* Ivy yips beneath his grip.

I will. I open the door, Ivy barks and the hinges sigh behind me.

Mauer stands skinny and careless, one foot on the cement steps of my front door.

Hello, there. His grin is familiar and schmoozy. Mauer is the boy with russet hair and Catholic guilt, the one with friends from other school districts. He is also the boy with the getaway car and the only one who can coax me from my homework. His lashes are long and pale, and tiny freckles

spot the flat sides of his fingers. I make sure to pull the front door closed so he cannot see inside. I hear Ivy bark from behind the door.

What're you doing here? His t-shirt is dark green and tight, much tighter than the college football shirts my brother and father wear.

He slides a hand into his pocket. *Kidnapping you.*

I pretend this is a surprise, an inconvenience, a tough decision. *I didn't think you'd actually come.* A crane fly bobs along the porch light I must remember to turn off. It looks like a giant mosquito and repeatedly rams into the webbed, dirty crease of our house. My mother will sometimes talk to the spiders that crouch here and wait. *I've got work to do.*

Mauer steps off the porch, smiling. He knows tonight he does not need to try so hard. *Like hell you do. Come on.*

I look beyond him. The rest of the boys loiter in my driveway as if it were their own. Eimer, Charlie, Evan. The runner, the animator, the boy with the buttonquails. They look blue in the evening light.

All right. Fine. I push my hair behind my ears and step off the stoop, closer to him.

Mauer shakes his head, still smiling. He is not much taller than me and the dark green t-shirt reveals a body without excess. Compact, rolled tight as a sleeping bag. He walks toward the car and throws his words like breadcrumbs over his shoulder. *Mertz, it's always pulling teeth with you.*

The tips of the hostas brush against my legs as I follow. *I am getting better,* I think. *I am, I am.* The keys to his black Corolla with the green hood jangle in his hands.

When the boys see me, they jeer. They know how hard it is to get me out.

Eimer walks up to me and points toward the big blue house hogging the skyline. *What is that?*

I emulate the anger of my parents. *Bullshit.*

Eimer is the skinny runner, and I've known him since third grade. He looks like an upright snake, a sprinter, a guy who laughs at bitter things. Eimer, like me, has lived in town all his life near Lake Nagawicka; three streets and a slope separate him from the shore and a lakeside restaurant. In summer, the smell of seaweed and hot grease fans upward toward his yard like a mountain cloud.

Eimer does not have a big house. I have only seen it once, and when I did, I saw that it was grey, long and one-story with a fish-shaped ornament on the lawn. Eimer, like me, never invites anyone over or lets anyone in. He, like me, sees no point. We don't have done basements with TVs; all our space is taken up by living. We are embarrassed and certain we've got nothing to share, so we spend our time in the pools and dens of other people.

Eimer shakes his head. He is practical and unlike Mauer, speaks without intended poetic effect. His t-shirt advertises last year's cross country meet and billows around his waist. *That house is way too big for that lot.*

I know. I search for a word. *It's a behemoth.* We wait for a beat more, listen to the wave of cricket song. The light is almost gone. *I wish it'd just go away.*

Eimer scratches his stomach. This is the closest he gets to closeness. *Yeah.* He makes toward the car door. He won't say it, but he knows what it's like.

Eimer crams into the back seat with Charlie and Evan, leaving me shotgun. I crawl in front and feel what a seventeen-year-old would call alive. Mauer sets his hand on the stick shift and looks into the backseat. *To Andrea's house we go?*

A whoop, a holler. Mauer shifts into gear and the black Toyota Corolla blasts off into the night, gunning towards a house with a hot tub, a pool, a basement done-up. It all feels so good— my body, my teeth, my hair— to be away and unmasked by the wind.

The blue house is not the only new monstrosity on the block. A man whom my Aunts have dubbed “The Asshole” bought and renovated a house next to the public lake access. It is big and white, and the owner is not friendly. He thinks he owns the access and can, like a bridge troll, regulate who uses the lake. I learn this the hard way. Today, my father has decided to test him.

Towing the kayak on a rickety three-wheeled harness, my father rolls down the access like a Cadillac. He wears green and blue trunks and old, stinking loafers he never fully pulls over his heels. These are his yard work shoes, shoes he mows grass in, the shoes he wades into lake water with, collecting duckweed and wet.

I follow him, nervous and holding the paddles. I look off toward the balcony of the white house. Joanie, the former tenant, used to stand there and smoke, dabbing the ashes into a pot of begonias. She had worked at Briggs and Stratton and lived there with her aging mother, a deaf, white cat and loud cockatoo named Charlie. Her house overflowed with boxes of litter and mega-packs of Kool-Aid, which she always shared with John and me. Joanie was always sharing things.

I peer towards the windows. It does not look like he’s home. The curtains don’t part; no light flickers on. The house is dark, but I still worry he is watching. I think of the blue house, how it too crowded and changed the space and atmosphere of the neighborhood. All these rich people around the lake. I don’t like them.

My father doesn’t look at the house, at the windows. He journeys forth, as sure and unafraid as the Monopoly man. *What a nice day.* He smiles. The sun is warm. My father is spiting the Asshole, and I think he is enjoying it.

Yesterday, Mauer and I came down here with the kayak. The Asshole strolled out.

What are you doing? He crossed his arms and told us that we couldn’t launch the kayak off this land, as it wasn’t for launching. He pointed to the shoreline. *Look at all the nice bushes the Lake Welfare Committee put there.*

Afraid and unwilling to stand up to a well-dressed adult, we apologized and slunk off to the Access, dragging the bright yellow kayak behind us, alternating grips when our arms and hands began to shake. When I told my father, he narrowed his eyes and shook his head. *Aw, that's bullshit. He's got no say on that.* He was indignant and uncharacteristically defensive. *That's public land.* The next day, he decided, would be a perfect day to go kayaking.

I'm surprised at his subversion. My father does not usually make public political statements, and when he does, they are manicured letters to our state representative. Perhaps it's because when he was young, he worked to maintain public lands. Perhaps because public lands are the only way we could enjoy the lake.

He pushes the nose of the kayak into the lake and tosses the trailer into a dense, ornamental bush the "Lake Welfare Committee" planted. He surveys Lake Nagawicka. *Where do you want to go?*

I smile. My father asks as if there are unlimited options, as if we have many routes, but we only have two: St. John's Bay or the Island. My father and I are alike in this way, creatures of habit tracing well-worn routes to recapture the joy of first traveling them. We never do, but we pretend. I am twenty; he is fifty-two. This is something we both need.

I look toward the bulrushes. St. John's Bay is where the dam is, where the painted turtles are, where mean, crew-cutted boys catch frogs to take home and eat. If we go to the Island, we can see the houses. I look toward the trees in the middle of the lake. *How about the Island?*

My father nods and holds the kayak for me as I step in, negotiating space with the spider web in the tip of the boat. I sit and he gets in, wet feet to the back of my seat. We push off, our purple paddles dipping and pulling water in time. We glide. We coast. I dip a finger in and watch the bluegills flash between the lake weeds and disappear. We are at water line. I am reminded of the things you cannot do in a skidoo or a speedboat.

St. John's Island is a small island once owned by the junior military academy in town. It is wooded and laced with old paths and empty chip bags. The city launches fireworks from here in July. We nudge the kayak around its curve and into open water, into *Piss Alley*.

In front of us, a collection of uniform luxury condos crowds the shore. Next to them, a parade of mansions: garish, modern, Gatsby-esque. The yards roll from yawning deck to manicured shore, spilling fertilizer and runoff and soil into the lake. This is in part how silt gets made: erosion from the rich. I look at these houses. They could be Rob Miller homes.

Look at that one. I point at a Scandinavian-looking house clad in blonde wood and metal. The boathouse has party chairs on the roof. *God.* Do people really throw parties this big? Do people really know enough people to fill that deck, that lawn?

I wonder who owns these homes. Business people from Chicago? Investors in Milwaukee? How do they make their money? One of the mailboxes bears the last name of the former baseball commissioner and Milwaukee native, Bud Selig. Perhaps they're related.

These homes are located along an area of the lake called *Piss Alley*. It is called *Piss Alley* because here the lake is shallow and swimmable and the preferred hangout spot of hot, drunk, fully-bladdered bodies. Pontoons and speedboats congregate here in summer; tan lake people pop cans of beer and sink their anchors into feet of Nagawicka silt. They drink and yell and warm the water. It is a bit too early for the parties today. My father and I paddle around and make our way back home. I look down into the clear water.

Remember your shoe?

My father stops paddling and we let the kayak glide. *Probably still down there.*

Many years ago, our two-person kayak, saddled with the uneven weight of a grown man and two children, capsized. It was windy and we were in view of the *Piss Alley* rodeo. When my father planted his feet on lake bottom, the silt sucked his left shoe off. Ate it in a cloud of fine dust and

fish shit. My father swore and righted us and when we reached shore and he towed the kayak up Oak Street, his one bare foot made water stains on the gritty pavement. We never found that shoe.

My father dips his paddle in the water, agitating the silt below. *Ready?*

Yeab.

The wind is to our front. I paddle hard, splashing cold water backward onto my father's bare legs.

When we dock, he drags the kayak from the shore, flattening the bushes. He attaches the three-wheeled harness, and I grab the paddles. He looks toward the open deck of Joanie's house, made bigger and whiter after renovations. A challenge? No one comes out.

We walk up the street, back home. My father's shoes squelch with each step. Somewhere in the lake, a ten-year-old loafer sinks a bit deeper into the silt.

*

I am twenty-five and my parents have moved into a new house in a subdivision with cul-de-sacs and sod grass. John works in Illinois and I am home for the summer, so I must dismantle our childhood alone.

Ivy is old and can barely get up. Legs splayed, she struggles to find purchase and raise her bones from the laminate flooring in the new kitchen. She is not used to having such slippery ground underfoot, and neither are we. Instead of pacing the walls looking out the windows, she spends most of her days sleeping on her side in the dog bed, looking like a mannequin. My mother reminds me she is an old lady, that collies are prone to hip dysplasia. If she hears me when I leave the house, she charges across the kitchen, toe nails skittering on the laminate, barking like a five-year-old. If she does not, she sleeps. Deafness tempers her anxiety.

My dad does some research and buys what looks like a rainy day crafting kit to help Ivy get back on her feet. We are a three-person pit crew: I hold Ivy down, my mother massages her face, my

father dabs her feet in mucilage and blue grit to give them traction. Once her paws dry, she clicks across the kitchen, jerking her feet as if stung by ants. When she reaches the carpeting, she lies down in a huff and commences licking.

Well. My father watches from the couch. *So much for that.*

The new house is at the tip of a peninsula of other people surrounded by other people. Apparently, that's Jean, that's Bill, that's the man who, like clockwork, runs by in an orange blazer every morning. If the wind is right, they smell grain from the feed mill. If it's wrong, they smell chicken shit from the egg-laying facility on highway A. When my parents discuss a restaurant I've never been to, I realize that their life is no longer mine.

Wanna go for a swim? My father stands in the kitchen in his stinking loafers. It is late summer, almost evening, and I will be heading back to Iowa soon. I want all the water I can get.

Sure.

I stand out at the end of the driveway, waiting for him to change and meet me. The grain elevator looms like a spaceship on the horizon, silver against pink.

Ready? He comes out with his green trunks, heels hanging over the backs of his shoes. There is a lake close by, but we cannot see it from the house, so my father and I bike. We sling beach towels around our necks and pedal down to the public beach, the sky purpling before us. The frontage is vast, and when we dive in, the lake is bathwater warm. My father does a poor backstroke—the only stroke he knows—and I bob in the deep end, listening to the boats motor across the far end of the lake. We are the only ones at the beach.

When we bike back, water slicks off and chills my skin. Crows sit like gargoyles on the power lines above us, cawing and swooping from line to darkening tree. As I pedal, I think of our beginning places, how we are dropped there like shoes with no say in the matter. Perhaps that's the thing I love most: that I made the most of where I was dropped.

When we return, Ivy is waiting there at the door, white muzzle up. She barks as if we are coming home for the first time.

BILL

The fatigue blunts my anxiety. I feel golden, suspended, delirious as I lug two suitcases, one lime green and one blue, around the baggage claim of the Oslo airport. I try to find customs. I do not know what it is, or how it works, but I know strangers should not bring in strange things. A large sign next to two tunnels says *Ute*. One is bathed in red light; the other, green. One is to declare, the other, not. *Is this self-selecting?* I eye the brick-faced personnel in navy uniforms surveying the crowd. I am too afraid to ask. And what do I declare? *I am twenty-three with a beige money pouch slung around my neck at the behest of my mother.*

I hesitate. I fear one of the uniformed agents will bark some harsh Norwegian vowel at me and accost me with their dog. I cannot tell them I have never done this before, that I do not know what to do. Shame coils in my gut. Everyone else looks so self-assured, with their square jaws and straight hair, their wheeled, black carry-ons and svelte overcoats. They tick like clocks and here I stall, flanked by cheap, bright luggage the size of bookcases.

I remember my mother's face at the Minneapolis airport. The color of begonias, hot as a rash and wet. It rose in places and fell in others, a topography of grief. She pulled me close until our bones met. *Don't you trust anyone*, she choked into my neck. Her eyes were drawn tight, thin and sharp as slivers. It was our last embrace before I folded myself into the long line of strangers waiting to go through security. I was the first one in our family to leave the country, the first to go overseas. The wet point of her nose sunk into the pocket above my collarbone. *Don't you dare.*

I wheel the rings on my finger. One is my grandpa's wedding band. He was not afraid to speak and was the first to tell my mother and her sisters not to set stock in other people. The other ring is my grandma's. She hid each time the Jehovah's Witnesses came to the door. I channel Papa. *Make a decision, pull yourself up.* I tug my luggage in the direction of the green tunnel.

I enter blinking on the other side. No customs, no officer, no dog. Natural light pours through the glass and I peer into a crowd of people holding signs. After filtering through several faces, I then spot the one I am looking for.

Bill Warner is neat and tight as military sheets. He is tall and wiry with the eyebrows of a Scottish terrier, but his brown eyes are puckish, inscrutable, trickster. They could go this way, or that. An American expat from Kentucky, he runs the writing center where I will be working. He shakes my hand, grabs my suitcases, and leads me through the revolving doors, across the parking lot, and into Norway. I follow a man I do not know.

Bill grapples with my luggage before settling it into the trunk of his tiny Volkswagen. I am reminded of how my father threw them so easily into our van. Once inside, he points to a wilted sandwich in the cup holder. "I thought you'd be hungry. Something to hold you over until dinner." I grab the sandwich. "It's peanut butter and banana. Norwegian-style."

"Norwegian-style" means the sandwich is open-faced. Disks of browning banana nestle into the peanut butter on one side of the bread, uncovered and exposed to the Scandinavian air. A thin piece of *matpakeke* paper separates the two slathered slices, ensuring that they do not glue together. I peel the square of wax paper off and ferry the *smørrebrød* into my mouth. My hands shake. I had been too scared to order anything from the Icelandair flight attendants with their steel enforced blonde bobs. My credit card would not work, and I was scared to ask if they took kroner. People who travel already know these things.

The sandwich is a bit flattened and warm, but mushy is what makes it good. Norwegians do not usually eat *peanutsmør*. A more authentic sandwich would have born a blush of salmon or a clump of *makrell i tomat*, perhaps a beige spoonful of warm *leverpostei*. My mind filters through the pictures of food I memorized in my Norwegian textbook. *Leverpostei* comes in a tuna tin stamped

with a picture of a smiling boy. Peel back the top, and there you see what looks like the ground up flesh of so many Anglo-Saxons. I am grateful that this is not *leverpostei*.

“Bill, thank you. You have no idea how good this is.”

He flaps his hand in the air and pulls out of the parking lot. “Oh, I just thought you’d be hungry. It’s a long flight.” Bill, like other Norwegians, does not marinate in his own achievements. “I’d offer you my soda, but I already drank from it while driving.” He waits a beat. “I mean, if that doesn’t bother you, please take some.”

Bill is in his sixties. I think of backwash and decline.

The car wends its way along the E6. I look out at the great flat cliffs lining the highway, shorn rocks the color of slate. In some places, large bolts stud the rock. In others, thick nets cascade from treed top to highway bottom. I do not understand this, and I do not ask Bill. I only imagine these are measures to keep the rocks in place, to pin them to the earth or catch them when they fall. I wonder if Norway has problems with this, with great grey boulders hurtling down off the hills and onto Volkswagens along the neat E6. What a thing that would be: crushed alongside a stranger somewhere west of the Oslo fjord. My mother would never stop crying, would never stop cursing stone and dirt.

I turn my focus from the cliff faces and look straight ahead. Nausea rises like a flooded river in my gut: slow, silty, inexorable. Strange cars get me carsick, and Bill’s car feels like it is floating. I breathe in. I breathe out. My delirium does not numb this feeling, nor my shame at the quiet between Bill and me. I urge myself to talk, so I ask about his kids, and he tells me about his son.

“Peder plays the nyckelharpa. Do you know what that is?”

He explains. It’s a thing with strings and keys, an instrument bowed like a violin and keyed like an accordion. “Full of Scandinavian yearning. Like the landscape. Isolated, cold, dark.” He

smiles. I imagine the sound, deep throated and singular, pooling and ricocheting in pine-bristled *daler* during *mørketiden*, animating the dark. *Yearning for what?*

Ås, where I will work for the next year, is neither mountain country nor fjord country. As we distance ourselves from the Oslo fjord, the land dips down into bowls rimmed by pine and cow. Sometimes, a bright swatch of golden: canola. The land rolls, but not too much. This land, I hazard to think, looks like Wisconsin land. These trees, Wisconsin trees. When I was young, my father taught me how to distinguish between a red and white pine: one hard, one soft, one with five needles, one with three. The forests here flash by in impenetrable stains. I cannot tell if they are something I know or something I do not.

*

That night, I will walk to Bill's home in the rain. The napkin he drew directions on will run and lose me along Sagaveien, reel me back, and land me piteously on his doorstep with damp, slimed sandals. He will give me a white shower towel, a baking dish, a liter of milk, raisin bran, and small cups of melon flavored yogurt. Bill will pack his wife's leftover vegetable lasagna and fruit pie into an old cookie container and tell me take it. *We'll get you settled.*

Bill will walk me back home. Black magpies will tip their white tails and march along the damp road. Slugs as big and thick as a carpenter's thumb will lay beached on the gravel shoulder. I will think of my mom; I will roll my grandpa's ring. I wish I could tell them, *sometimes it's good when we have no choice.*

CROSS-COUNTRY

In the solitude of the lodge bathroom, I assess my injury. I pretend I'm my mother.

An abrasion the size of a quarter and the color of a New Jersey sunset sits beneath my left eye. It is bright. It is bleeding. The flesh around it is swollen and rising, and my eye sinks back into it as if it were a leather lobby couch. This, I know, will get worse before it gets better.

I bare my teeth and look for chips. No new nicks; just the old ones from my nervous grinding habit and my brother's rogue foot. A small cut near my chin bleeds. My face is wet and wind-scraped, but my bones are unbroken. My eye is not punctured. *Thank you, thank you. Tusen takk, tusen takk.* I dab a piece of toilet paper with water and begin to clean the scrape. The paper frays and becomes sodden. Tiny bits float in the wound. My gut coils with helplessness.

I think of my father. He is at home, back in Wisconsin, falling asleep on the couch, mouth open like a mason jar. Blue sweatshirt, floppy white socks. My mother is in the bedroom, anxiety tempered by a thin veneer of sleep. I have not told her about my accident yet, nor do I want to. This is the stuff of her worry: plane crashes, theatre shootings, and me hurt and sick, away from home. I hear her now, rising from bed, voice thick with mouth guard: *I told you so.*

My face looks like a Picasso painting. It has never been symmetrical—my left side is slightly larger than my right—but the swelling exaggerates it. Lifted and winched up, off kilter with the other, my left eye floats in its own piece of face.

I peer over my cheekbone like a snow bank. The clock says 6:00. Our big program dinner is at 6:30. It is a social event, a networking event, a schmoozing event. A typical American event that I would avoid even without facial injuries. I will be expected to talk, to chirp, to cocktail; to love where I am and what I am doing. To perform.

I pull myself away from the mirror and crawl into bed. My eye oozes. The thin white sheet isn't long enough to cover my face.

*

Cross-country skiing is the type of punishing, aerobic activity I should enjoy. My body is built for cold, for slogging, for enduring. I inherited my father's compulsion for running, and though I, like him, am no good at it, I do it often. Cross-country skiing is the winter analog when the snow gets too deep to run. It is individual, long-distance and silent. You can suck up the same amount of pine air, feel the same pleasant hum of stretched muscles and emptied lungs, and commune with the same quiet.

In Norway, the sport is lifeblood; it is identity. Five-year olds bundled like puff pastries in neon snowsuits expertly swish behind their parents on intermediate trails. Old women with crinkled eyes transfer weight from left to right, left to right, skiing across a fallow field to the local *Rema 1000* for a bar of chocolate and a bag of oranges.

So when I began my yearlong teaching assignment in Norway, I was determined to take up the sport. Impassive as rocks during the workweek, Norwegians open up in the mountains. They smile, head-nod, chat with strangers. The alpine air, I was told, made them thaw. And I longed for this, this warmth and connection. I failed to engage Norwegian culture up to this point: no friends, no *julefest*, no trips to fjords. But this, this silent, swinging glide through trees, I told myself, I could embrace. This was my best hope to be embraced back.

*

When I was thirteen, my father took my brother and me cross-country skiing for the first time. We drove to the local bike shop where a clerk in a dusty back closet rifled through a box of men's ski shoes to fit my feet. The leather on the pole grips unraveled and lolled like tongues; the

blades were ungreased. My father went along with the whole show because he didn't know any better. None of us knew any better. None of us had ever skied.

We drove to Scuppernong Springs, a segment of the Kettle Moraine State Forest gullied by glacial ice. Skiers in tight spandex with legs like sandhill cranes cruised in from the trails, eyes shaded by polarized sunglasses. These people were sports cars: sleek, fit, efficient. Their sweat smelled of wintergreen; their lenses glinted orange in the afternoon sun. My brother and I huddled near the trunk of our grey mini van, my father grabbing John's shoulders for support as he struggled to clip into his skis. *Stick to the green trail*, he said.

Knock-kneed and crippled by a lifelong inability to let myself slide, I clomped instead of sailed. I snowshoed. My brother lumbered. My father, a lead-footed runner with the grace of a pine board, was no better. We all stabbed at the snow with our shitty poles and worked three times as hard to gain ten feet as the sleek skiers did to cross fifty. *Get over*, my father would yell from behind my brother and me. Huffing, we all sidlined ourselves into the pine boughs to let a couple glide past. We watched as they herringboned their way up the steep hill. My father stopped and leaned on his poles. *I guess that's how you do it*.

I tried crossing the back of my skis like the effortless couple. I made an X and pushed my momentum forward. The skis straightened, I slid backwards and fell to my knees. I X'd again and crawled back up. I slid back down. I crawled back up. I slid back down. The jeans over my knees were hard and iced, and I punched the snow with my fist. A group of spandexed men galloped up behind us, and I wanted to trip them.

Here, my father said, and offered me his shoulder and unclipped my shoes. He gave a pinched smile as the group behind us powered past, speaking what sounded like German. They clucked several soft, condemning consonants and herringboned their way up the hill.

My face was raw and pink like butchered meat. I slung my skis over my shoulder, looking away from my father. Shin-deep in the drifts, I walked away from him, up the hill.

*

The collision is slow and explosive. I smash my left cheekbone against the hard, flat of compacted snow. I run my tongue across my teeth, counting. *One, two, three.* I check for chips; I taste for blood. I am reminded of my recurring nightmares, where I crack and lose my teeth and everybody sees my broken smile.

I pretend that I am tough and unfazed, and stand to brush the snow off my body. *Whoa*, I hope the gesture says, *that was something.* Haley, my American skiing partner, walks toward me, wagging her hands, telling me she's sorry. When she gets near, her sporty grin fades. A cupped hand covers to her mouth. *Your eye.*

I pat it gently. The tissue around it is rising fast like yeasted dough. I wish I could see it. I get closer to her. *Describe it to me. My eye.*

I imagine it pink and hemorrhaged, a dark spot where a congregation of veins has ruptured like bath beads. I think about crushed sinus cavities. Scarlet eyes. Losing sight.

She points beneath my eye. *No, it's below.*

I tap my cheekbone but it feels numb with burn and cold. A couple behind us on the hill inches toward us, staring at my face. This is what Norway is, I think. A place where my welts are seen by others but not by me.

I feel the meat of my cheek dilate with each slug of my heart. My eye fogs. I look at Haley, at the mountains, and the vast landscape of hard, lonely white. Now, I see something like a small dark mountain encroaching upon the lower half of my vision. I picture a blood blister, like the type my father gets when he hammers his thumb. A black violet pearl; a blood filled sac. The evergreens darken along the horizon.

Haley. I continue to interrogate her. Here on this mountain, she is my eyes. She must help me assess the severity of my injury. *Is it a blister? A cut?*

Maybe. Haley examines it carefully, bobs her head side to side. *It's dark. Raw.*

I peel down my lower lid. *Is there blood?* She squints and examines the curvature of my eyeball. Her eyes are enormous and blue.

No, nothing. Just below.

I step back and tap my face, checking for tenderness. There I feel it, in the sling of my orbital bone. The softness, the hit. I look up at Haley. She surveys my face and her eyes crimp.

Haley is a type of joyous I do not understand. She bends her reedy frame around doorways and sings about coffee. She does not swear and goes to sparsely-attended Norwegian church on Sundays. She too, is a Fulbright scholar, and designs costumes for the university opera in Oslo. I see that Haley feels guilty about my accident, and I do not persuade her otherwise. Let me put shit in her coffee.

I flex my numbing fingers in my gloves. The private *hytta* on the mountainsides are rimed in golden, evening light. Some slopes are gilded, some shadowed and grey. I watch groups of skiers disappear downhill, their effortless glides tethered to tracks leading back to the Skeikampen lodge. Haley turns to me. *Can you get back?*

I gingerly unclip my boots from the skis and sling the greased wood under my armpit. The dark mound beneath my left eye throbs. *I'll run.*

*

When I round the final hill, the sky is striated in violet and juniper. The lights of the lodge beam in the distance, and I can see the well-worn path. I allow myself to walk. *You made it, you made it.* The evergreens lift morosely in a cold wind.

Haley, who skied in front of me the entire time, unclips. Her face is rosy and whole, lively. Mine feels pared, like a white potato. That's what it is. A lumpy, smashed white potato. She leads me toward the ski hold. *Let's put these back.*

We crest one more hill of slicked, iced snow to reach the lodge. The last three miles depleted my body. I ran up ski hills. I ran down ski hills. I ran in boots like clipped reindeer hooves, puncturing the snow with hollowed-out tips. I ran to beat the setting sun. I ran to keep myself warm. Haley skied. The Norwegians, they skied, too. They skimmed by and stared at me. No smile, no head nod, no small talk chat.

And all the while, my eye, it pulsed. It ticked and expanded, ticked and expanded, tissue purpling like the twilight sky.

*

The lobby is small, and the Americans from my program clog the space. They loiter near the TV, watching professional skiers in gem-colored body suits *gå på langrenn*. Several chat near the fire. Others mingle on the couch. *Talk, talk, talk.* How can people be so good at it?

When I enter, I look for Rena, the expat who in part runs the Fulbright Norway program. Several ask Haley what happened and she tells them. *Skiing accident.* A few knitted brows from the mothers, a few notes of pity. I want someone to recognize my endurance. I want someone to ask Haley how I managed to return. I want someone to tell me how tough I am. *You ran all that way with busted face? In deep snow and skis shoes? Oh, you flinty little thing!*

Nobody tells me this. I have never been told I was a flinty little thing, and this moment is no different. The others wander around, networking and warming their hands in front of the big fireplace. They're priming themselves for that big program dinner. I swallow my private feat of stoicism and closet it like a big rock in my gut. I spot Rena. Red turtleneck sweater, high-waisted jeans. She stands near the fire.

Rena, do you have a first aid kit for me? I point to my face. *Skiing accident.*

She fastens her eyes on mine. They are whole and brown, unfettered by injury. *Oh no. I'm sorry to hear that, Jenna. I do not.* She must sense my incredulity. Rena waves her hand around the warm lobby. *Maybe ask around?*

I imagine the big, white first aid kits lodged in big, yellow school buses. The first aid kits teachers stash in canvas tote bags on fieldtrips. This is a program-sponsored outing. How is this not a liability? How can you not anticipate injury?

I think of my mother's overflowing cabinet of Ace bandages, urinalysis sticks, and rubbing alcohol. She has a mercury thermometer, old crutches in the basement, and refuses to get rid of my back brace from eighth grade. My mother would have you all reamed.

Rena shuffles me toward the front desk. *You might check here?*

The attendant is jolly and rotund, which hardly any Norwegian is. Most are svelte and animated by the cheer of a dead carp. I ask him if he has any bandages, any ointment. *I do not, but I can get you some ice.* He disappears behind a door and reemerges with a plastic bag of cubes. *I'm sorry. That looks very bad.* His mustache is long and curled, ornate. When our group first arrived at Skeikampen we noticed his facial hair immediately.

I take the chunky bag and place it on my eye. Cold infuses into the wound. I look up at the round Norwegian. This un-Norwegian of Norwegians, this man who makes small talk and smiles with strangers. *This, this is why you are behind the front desk,* I think. *Because you—you— can interact with people.*

I ask him if the local grocery store is open.

Closed. But it will open at 11:00 tomorrow.

I readjust the ice on my face. This cold feels good. I want to hug him. I want to tell him his mustache is dazzling. But as a Midwesterner, I, too, am inhibited.

Thank you. Thank you. Tusen takk. Tusen takk.

*

I am alone and looking like a washed-up prizefighter on Platform Five of the Oslo Sentral train station, headed back to Ås. My left eye is swollen and pusses like a soft, punctured plum. *One more train ride, one more train ride*, I tell myself. The *Ankomster* board shuffles times and blinks. Norwegians shimmer past. A woman on a slatted bench steals a glance, then diverts. Her hands, the wall, a man playing the accordion— these things are suddenly more interesting than my face. *My face*. Pulped up, done-in, as big as defeat. I hike my scarf up higher but the wool wilts back down, hot and moist with breath. *I know what this looks like*, I want to tell her. A woman, alone, with a black eye, her belongings in a sodden bag at her feet. *But this isn't what you think*.

I am used to this by now. Last night at the program dinner, seated along a banquet table of overeducated Americans, I toughened my face to the questioning stares of wait staff and colleagues. After welcoming remarks, I glommed onto a boy researching in Bergen who liked to talk about beer. *Ask questions*, was my mother's best advice to avoid divulging details about oneself. *People like to talk about themselves*. I queried him, grilled him, captured him so I would not have to flit away and talk to others. After awhile, he stopped staring at my face. After awhile, he left to chat with other people. I mopped my eye and picked at the paper napkin in my lap. White flecks pooled on my knees.

In the station, I turn my gaze downward again and thumb the bag of peas. The makeshift icepack lost its cold on the long bus ride back from Skeikampen. A warm bag of peas, a sore tailbone, and the flash of hard blue eyes on my mushy American face. *My face*. It's me, my mother, my father. It's all fight, no prize.

HEARTWOOD

Yesterday, I heard the crews before I saw them. The purr of the idle saw and then the whine of its bite. Walking back from work, I crested the hill through the park and saw a group of men in neon vests. Those grounded looked skyward to the man in the nest of the white bucket truck thinning the crown of a mammoth oak tree. They all looked like Lilliputians scaling Gulliver.

Today, I am finishing the last leg of an early morning run. Sweat trickles along my leg and stings the inside of my chafed thighs. My new blue shorts are too short and my skin now reaps the consequences of six miles of friction. I yank them down and pick my way between the fallen limbs and broken twigs to where the tree once stood.

It was there and now, it isn't. *They're done. It's done.*

Yesterday, I walked quickly, wanting to clench my ears against the sound, but I heard the cuts. I saw several branches fall. I made myself watch.

Today, cocooned in the quiet of morning, I have the opportunity to view what's left of the tree without the fear of observation. The stump is immense and hollow, gutted like an acorn squash scooped out by a spoon. I touch the wound: soft, damp, rotting.

I run my hand along the rings, years collapsing beneath my fingertips. *Here is Iowa's statehood. Here is my birthday. Here is when my oak died.*

The heady scent of the tree's passing still lingers in the air. I wonder: *Were you a bur oak, too?*

*

We did not know, in fact, how old the oak was that stood in the middle of our street.

We knew its width. My brother, encouraged by a fourth grade teacher, had wrapped a white cotton string around its trunk, balled it into a plastic bag and brought it to class. The teacher strung the line between two volunteers and the kids gaped. *Look at this!*

We knew the species: *Quercus macrocarpa*, bur oak. Fire resistant, drought tolerant, used for railroad ties and tough as hell. My father knew this much, knew from the rounded lobes of the leaf and the acorn's fringed cap. He knew the tree was old, but not how old.

My uncle, who worked for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, could not tell us either. It was summer and the brink of evening when he walked out to the tree with my father to make his guess. I was young, in grade school, with sweaty pigtails and the unshakeable belief that all nature was magic. My brother and I watched from the driveway. The fireflies flickered and lifted into the air.

When my uncle reached the oak, he looked it up and down and smoothed the trunk like the flank of a spooked prize quarter horse. He helped manage a tract of state forest in the northeastern part of the state, the type of forest the state maintained for harvest rather than preserved for its own good. He knew his trees well, even better than my father.

My uncle circled the trunk and tipped his head skyward to view the crown. When I asked, he told me there was no way to know the age for sure, that he would need a special tool that might hurt the oak. I later learned it was called an increment borer, a long sharp screw you twist into the tree at breast height that draws out a cylinder of soft wood legible to those looking to date the tree. Sapwood, one layer is called. Heartwood, another.

My uncle could not tell us the age. He did not have the special metal tool, and I doubt it would have been able to prick the big bur oak that stood there, in that spot, since the time our town was founded. But this I can tell you. The girth exceeded my embrace. The furrowed bark was cut with ravines knuckle-deep. And when the wind came, the tree sounded more like water than the lake down the road.

This oak, I knew, was older than one century, and most likely two. It stood in the middle of our street. Why had this oak not been slashed and cut when the land was buzzed and made flat for farm and street—why had this one survived?

My home, my place in this world was defined by this tree: *I live at one, zero, zero, seven Oak Street*, I repeated to my mother. I wrote it on worksheets and school forms, gave it to friends and postal carriers. I did not think the oak would go. I did not think the house would go. I did not think I would ever be without either.

*

Here is what I remember of my oak.

Collecting acorns. Collecting leaves. Chasing grey squirrels. Tracing bark. Looking up, looking up, looking up.

I remember my aunt hovering at the end of her driveway in a baggy blue hoodie. A yearly tradition, she parked herself there to watch my brother and I leave for the first day of school. In elementary school, I waved back. In high school, I reddened and slouched deeper into the clammy grey leather of the bus seat.

When I looked back, I saw an old oak, a sliver of lake, a blue woman waving and smiling until I disappeared.

The tree, I'm sure, remembered much more. The turn of centuries, the advent of the automobile, a man and woman with big hair move into the prefab modular house across the street.

*

Each year, the oak tree shed more branches upon our lawn. My mother put on her garden gloves and collected the fallen branches in a taupe trash bin. I didn't recognize the shedding as signs of weakness or sickness or age. My mother, familiar with death, knew. She collected the limbs, shook her head, and tossed them to the woods out back.

*

The tree was a liability. This is what the city had said. This is how they rationalized the decision.

Perhaps they were right. Perhaps they were wrong.

Perhaps there were good years left. Perhaps there were not.

My neighbor Jane, who had lived in Delafield all her life, went to city hall and pleaded and cried. My parents testified, too. We read the minutes and watched the meetings on grainy local access TV. It was decided. The tree was to be terminated.

We asked, *Will you pay for a replacement?* We wiped the wet under our eyes and thought about the name of our street.

No, no, they said and looked away. *No, no*.

*

I was fifteen and rode the bus home every day after school. My bus driver looked like Santa and never spoke, and when he did, he swore. The worst days, I had to sit next to someone and make small talk. The best days, I sat alone and watched people out the window maneuver through the real world.

The driver slowed as he neared my street. I peeled my face from the window, shouldered my pack, and descended the steep stairs. The bus chuffed and left, ready to spit out the last of its customers. I stopped near the sewer grate and stared.

The trunk was there. The limbs were there. But where the canopy once was, there was nothing.

I saw a power line. I saw a newly unfettered view of sky. I saw Samson. I saw a buck without antlers. I saw my aunt four years before, battling breast cancer and shorn of hair. I saw stage one.

I did not see branches. I did not see leaves. Like arms severed at the wrist, the limbs of the great bur oak stretched and stretched and ended abruptly in stumps.

I was not there when they laid the first cut. I must have been sitting in chemistry or modern world history, worrying about a test. Perhaps I had been laughing when the crews in cherry pickers hacked at the canopy.

In the coming weeks, they cut down the oak in stages. My memory of these losses has faded: I know that they chopped the trunk into medallions and removed the roots that cradled the street. These images are less clear than what the bur oak first looked like without its crown.

I wish I would have skipped school, watched the city men cut it down. I wish I would have approached the oak in the night and leaned my forehead against the deep, furrowed bark. I wish I had kept vigil like it had for all the years I had been alive.

*

My father stole remnants of the great tree. One night, after school, I saw two cross-sections of oak in the garage. The slices were not cut from the trunk but rather, a thick branch. This was a part of the tree that never touched the ground; this was airborne wood, the seat of birds. The cross-sections lay next to the harvest gold refrigerator, powdered in their own dust.

I don't know when my father did it. Perhaps it was evening, after work, when he rolled out of his red Toyota Corolla sighing and smelling like air conditioning and indoors. Perhaps the carnage compelled him. He sat down his lunch box, unfurled the newspaper from under his arm and walked over to what was once a tree. Ivy barked from the window, her spit rusting the beige metal of the baseboard heaters. He remembered raking the leaves and tossing his children into the great heaps.

Or perhaps he did it in the morning, puffy eyed and freshly stinking from an early run. Blood warm, perhaps he felt righteous and defiant. Perhaps he wanted to finally stick it to the man.

He thought about it a lot or not at all and rolled a piece of the old oak he loved toward the house he hated.

My father said, *Jenna, one of those is yours*. It could be whatever I wanted it to be: a coffee table, a nightstand, the seat of a bar stool. My father was not handy with wood, so I would need to make the table myself or pay someone else to do it. The latter seemed unthinkable.

My father is not one for sentimental gestures. He does not defy or transgress or cry. He reminds me to check my bank account for fraud and puts air in my bike tires. Because of this, he was always gave strange, questionable gifts. But sometimes he did things like this. Sometimes he surprised me.

*

Our neighbor Jane canvassed the street for money to fund a new oak tree. She was a conservative woman with a neat haircut who worked in the office of an elementary school. Every morning at 5:30, she walked downtown, through the junior military academy, and along the lake. Three miles, like clockwork.

My parents chipped in money. My aunt and the neighbors across the street did too. Jane knew an arborist at the Presbyterian church who owned a landscaping business off the train tracks in Hartland: Sandy Bottom Nature Center. It was a small venture littered with wind chimes, birdhouses, and containerized trees.

Jane updated my mother each time they collected the mail. *Lake Country Reporter* and electric bills in hand, they chatted about their dying mothers, their kids, the status of the oak. When they waved goodbye and turned toward their own homes, their eyes lingered on the empty space in the middle of the street. The sky seemed too much.

*

My brother does not moon over trees like I do. He does not care to know about ecosystems or plants or how to arrange ornamentals in aesthetically pleasing patterns. But the summer after the city cut down the oak, my father encouraged John to get a summer job. Seventeen and strong-armed, John became a landscaper with Sandy Bottom Nature Center.

My brother looks like a landscaper. He is barrel-chested and thick and threw shot put on the high school track team. The boys at school slapped him on the back and called him *Beast*, *Beef Cake*. These are the same boys that chastised him for his underwear in the middle school locker room, the same boys that called me a bitch. Even the pastor at the church, a former chaplain in the armed forces, gripped John's shoulder and told him the Marines could use a boy like him. John eats a lot of meat and does not hug well.

But this is something those boys did not know: John is quiet and particular. He frets when he gets water on his church shirts and uses a blow dryer to evaporate the dark spots the spill left behind. John is funny and thoughtful and makes me birthday cards each year. I, on the other hand, am the aggressive one, the one who banged elbows with the girls of the sixth grade recreational basketball league. I gritted my teeth and boxed out to rebound the ball. During his games, John just stood in the paint and watched the ball sail through the hoop.

Over the course of his high school summers working at Sandy Bottom, the sun browned John's skin and tamed the acne blighting the corners of his face. He shouldered bags of mulch, dug holes, and planted ornamental bushes in the manicured lawns of rich people along Nagawicka Lake.

My brother did not know much about what he was planting but did what he was told, and did it thoughtfully. When John returned from work, face red with new burn, he watched TV on the couch and grumbled like a discontented union worker. *Real world's a bitch, Jenna.*

He planted the first bur oak with Matt. Matt was in his mid-thirties, the owner's right hand man, and plain as bread. As they dug the hole, John did not tell Matt that this was his street, that

house with the basketball hoop was his. The first tree died and stuck out like an arthritic finger in the middle of our street.

The second tree John planted alone. When he rolled down our road in Sandy Bottom's white pickup, John pretended he did not know anyone on the street, pretended he did not know where the hell he was. As John dug, he willed himself into anonymity. A nobody worker from a nobody town.

We all watched him, though. My mother watched John from the kitchen window. My aunt paced along the driveway, doing the same. She wanted to whistle through her teeth, shout *John Boy!* and catcall while he worked. But she knew better. John did not like public displays, and he certainly never wanted to be the center of one.

John did not know much about trees. He did not know about root flare, taproots, or transpiration. He did not know that summer was a bad season to plant or that mulch should not touch the trunk. When John planted the second bur oak, he was simply doing what he was told.

But my brother must have done something right. Because this tree, this was the tree that took.

*

John is twenty-eight now. He lives in central Illinois, works as a county health inspector, and complains about the corn and lack of Wisconsin sports. He drives from town to town keeping things clean and up to code: truck stops, basement bars, septic systems, and Super Eight motels. He spends his days driving, temping food, and checking off boxes in towns with more road than people.

My brother does not think too much about the oak tree. He does not worry the past like I do, does not carry it around like a soft old blanket and worry it until it is useless and threadbare. John worries about how he can get the Brewers game on TV, if the color of his shoes works with that shirt.

Some nights, he sends me pictures of soybean fields and sunsets. *Cornbelt life*, he says. He does this when he can't get the game, when he is lonely and the apartment is quiet. I go outside and send him a picture of an Iowa cornfield. My apartment is lonely and quiet, too. *Cornbelt life*, I say.

But I know he misses the oak because when my mother drives John north on I-39 out of Illinois, John holds up his phone and takes pictures of the Wisconsin roadside trees in bloom. He will save the pictures and scroll through them after dinner drinking a beer. *Look at all those trees*. Perhaps he remembers the time he wrapped a white string around the girth of the tree, how the bark felt on his young, soft arms. *Look at all that green*.

*

What did the city of Delafield do with the wood of my oak? Throw it in the off Cushing Park Road? Turn it into beautiful tables? Did the men divvy it up between them, take it home in their pick-up trucks and promise bunk beds to their daughters and kitchen tables to their wives?

Some cities harvest the wood, use it to chip paths or sell to lumber mills. They call it residue. Residue: what's sticky, what's unwanted, what's left behind.

*

Back in Iowa, I tell an arborist friend about the tree I saw in the park. He has a jolly laugh that rollicks down the street at two blocks distance. *The big one in Brookside*. I ask him to identify the tree, to do a post-mortem.

Fruiting bodies. He tells me he may have seen fungus along the trunk. This may account for the hollow space where the heartwood should be. He explains that sometimes, death is just age.

What species? I ask.

He seems sure. *That big? Bur. Definitely bur oak.*

It makes me wonder if my oak and this oak knew each other. *What a dumb thought*, I tell myself. I feel guilty that I am so soft to believe that trees across state lines maintain kinships and lines of communication. I am a bad scientist, a person who sentimentalizes nature.

I know that trees can be hazardous. I know they can rot from within, drop branches, crack and break like Dutch pretzels. Every year, people are injured or killed by falling trees and limbs. Responsible city foresters must cut old trees for legitimate reasons of public safety and health.

But then I think of a story a teacher once shared with me. She worked with the Iowa DNR and spent time with indigenous communities. Walking with a friend, she pointed to a pine.

Mind I pluck a few of its needles?

The indigenous woman responded by gesturing at the pine. *Don't ask me. Ask the tree.*

My teacher thought it was silly, this asking, but she did it anyway. Her fingers hovered above a branch. *May I?*

When she tugged the needles, the bundle came easy. She didn't have to pull at all.

*

Back at the Iowan oak, I worry people watch me. If they are awake, they peer through their windows with tight, tired faces. *Who is that girl, that girl with the knock-knees who runs here every morning? What is she doing by the tree?*

I squat and filter through the beautiful residue of a once great oak. I steal a leaf and then, a branch, but I am looking for something else.

They way she looks, she must have lost something.

And then I find it. Smooth with a shaggy hat, I clutch the acorn in my sweaty palm and run with it all the way home. It's what I am looking for, what I wish I had saved from the bur oak that stood in the middle of my street. I want to believe the acorn is the daughter and niece of two great sisters born on opposite sides of the Mississippi at the turn of the nineteenth century. That

somehow, in my hand, I hold the seed of something that will long outlive me and everybody that I love. I hold two hundred years of future. I hope it's longer.

NIGHTGAMES

FADE IN

EXT. SECLUDED LAKE IN NORTHERN WISCONSIN — NIGHT (DUSK)

TEDDY OLSEN, 13, lies on his belly along the bank of the lake, his face pressed against the viewfinder of a Nikon F2 camera. Dark brown freckles pepper his cheeks and a stubborn cowlick shoots up from his head; he has a Norman Rockwell-like innocence. His head and his camera are immersed in a tuft of spike rushes. Teddy peers through the viewfinder at a half-submerged bullfrog floating near a log. It slowly closes its golden eye and opens it again.

Teddy carefully moves his arm to adjust the lens, face still plastered against the camera, mouth slightly open.

The bullfrog, hearing Teddy RUSTLING in the rushes, disappears underwater with a PLOP.

Teddy exhales and leans his head back in disappointment. He crawls out of the spike rushes and stands up, his camera hanging from a thick strap around his neck. Teddy is scrawny and pale with legs and arms like white drinking straws. He wears muddy shorts and an oversized grey sweatshirt.

Seeing that the camera has sand, water, and dirt on it, Teddy bunches the baggy sleeves of the sweatshirt over his fistled hands and, with great care, wipes away the debris. A name tag reading CALVIN PLUM (906)353-7008 dangles from the strap. Teddy surveys his surroundings.

EXT. SAWMILL PROPERTY — NIGHT

The lake is small, boggy, and still, and is located on the property of an abandoned sawmill. A forest of birch, white pine and the occasional tamarack embrace the lake. Vines, and buckthorn saplings overrun the dilapidated buildings, which are peppered with graffiti. The windows are jagged and look like they have been shot out. A large, rusted conveyer belt leads into one of the structures; a sign read "Jansen Sawmill." This is the type of place teenagers go to smoke, hunt ghosts, and lose their virginity.

EXT. LAKEFRONT – NIGHT

Teddy's best friend, JESS KOSKI, 13, stands fifty yards from Teddy at the sandy, beachy edge of the lake. A Styrofoam cooler and green, aluminum tackle box sit on the ground near her feet. She casts her rod, reels it in until it CLICKS, and then lets it sit. Jess has long, stringy, brown hair, a tough mouth, and bony shoulders. Her Hodag Country Festival t-shirt is ratty and worn; bits of dead leaves cling to the frayed bottoms of her jeans.

Jess begins to reel in the line, jerking it every few seconds. It goes taut and the rod arcs.

EXT. BULRUSHES – NIGHT

RUSTLING draws Teddy's attention away from Jess. Twenty yards in the opposite direction, a raccoon humps out of the woods and pads down to the shallows. Teddy looks back at Jess, who reels in a fish, then creeps closer to the raccoon, hands on the camera.

The raccoon wades in the shallows among the rushes. It gropes the lake bottom with its paws, looking for fish, frogs, and clams. Teddy creeps within ten yards of the raccoon and crouches, bringing the camera up to his face. The raccoon catches a minnow that wriggles in its hands. The fish flashes silver as the raccoon begins to gnaw at it. Teddy inches closer.

Sensing a presence, the raccoon turns and sees Teddy. Minnow dangling from its mouth, it scampers up the bank and into the woods. Teddy huffs and lets the camera fall back to his chest. He walks over to Jess, who still fishes.

EXT. LAKEFRONT – NIGHT

Teddy sidles up next to Jess and hears a SPLASH. He looks down into the Styrofoam bucket near Jess's feet. It is half filled with water, and a lone rock bass circles the bottom, occasionally spitting up water with its tail.

JESS

You haven't said anything about last night.

Teddy crouches down by the Styrofoam bucket to better see the rock bass. It has scarlet eyes and a dorsal fin like a mohawk. Jess looks down at Teddy's head.

JESS (CON'T)

What did your dad say?

TEDDY

You know him.

Jess reels in her line a bit and waits for Teddy to speak.

TEDDY (CON'T)

He said I had no business telling Mr. Plum what happened.

JESS

Did you tell your dad Justin cornered you? In the bathroom?

Teddy dips his finger into the bucket and strokes the bass. Several moments pass.

TEDDY

He said Justin was acting out.

JESS

Because of his dad's accident?

TEDDY

Yeah.

JESS

He's been bothering you since the school bus in sixth grade.

TEDDY

I know.

JESS

Plum gave him what he deserved.

Teddy chases the bass with his hand. Several moments of silence pass. He takes his hand out of the bucket, wipes it on his jeans, and snaps several pictures of the rock bass. The camera CLICKS.

JESS

It was nice of Plum to give you his own camera for the contest.

TEDDY

It's a lot better than the school ones.

TEDDY

(looking at bass)

You should throw him back.

JESS

But this is a fat one.

Jess fully reels in her line and looks down at Teddy, who dips his hand back into the bucket.

JESS (CON'T)

I haven't caught anything all day.

TEDDY

Throw him back, Jess. Please.

Jess watches Teddy chase the bass with his index finger. The bass circles furiously, then slows, circles furiously, and then slows. She looks from the bass to the top of Teddy's cowlick.

JESS
Teddy Olssen. Teddy, Teddy Olssen.

Jess crouches down and examines the fish.

JESS (CON'T)
(to fish)
You better thank Teddy for this one.

Teddy takes his hand out from the water and picks up the bucket. Jess stands and casts again.

JESS (CON'T)
You know you can't save them all.

Teddy lugs the bucket to the lake edge and crouches down by the bank. He takes one final look at the rock bass and then dumps the bucket into the lake. Teddy watches the bass disappear into the brown water. He stands up and walks back to Jess.

TEDDY
I'm gonna go to the bathroom.

JESS
Alright.

Teddy walks away from the lake toward the gravel road.

EXT. GRAVEL ROAD – NIGHT

Teddy approaches a white pine off the shoulder of the gravel road. He looks at his camera, and then slips the strap off his neck. He examines it again, checking for water, dirt, and scratches. Once satisfied, he gingerly hangs the camera on a tree limb, makes sure it is stable, and then enters the woods.

EXT. WOODS – NIGHT

Teddy bushwhacks his way through the thick, overgrown underbrush. He finds an open, mossy spot and looks around. He unzips his shorts and squats, absently uprooting the moss and buckthorn saplings in front of him.

CLOSE-UP — TEDDY'S FOREARM

The high-pitched WHINE of mosquitoes. Several land on Teddy's forearm. He slaps at them, loses his balance, topples over on his right side. He readjusts and squats, brushing off dirt from his thigh. Mosquitoes WHINE near his face and Teddy slaps the nape of his neck.

Teddy looks up when he hears gravel CRUNCHING. At first the SOUND is rhythmic and distant, but soon it becomes louder and quicker. He fumbles with his pants, hears the POP of gunshots, and freezes.

Teddy looks toward the road but the thick underbrush blocks most of his view. He hears LAUGHTER of a teenage boy. The footsteps stop, and Teddy sees slivers of a white t-shirt through the trees.

JUSTIN

(O.S.)

Hey, Koski! This is nice!

Teddy grimaces and closes his eyes. The CRUNCHING fades as the boy bolts down the road toward Jess.

Teddy inhales, and then exhales. He stands, pulls on his pants, and makes his way back towards the road. Once the brush thins, he looks to the lake.

EXT. LAKEFRONT – NIGHT

A lanky, older boy approaches Jess. He has a black backpack on, a BB gun in one hand and the camera in the other. He grasps the camera by its strap and whirligigs it in the air.

EXT. GRAVEL ROAD – NIGHT

Teddy checks the area around the tree where he hung the camera. Once his fears are confirmed, he kicks the tree violently, on the brink of tears. His face is pinched and flushed, but he makes no sound.

EXT. LAKEFRONT – NIGHT

Teddy creeps down to the lake, careful not to be seen or heard. He nears the back of the boy, who laughs and swings the camera. Jess faces the boy and scowls. Teddy makes a failed swipe for the camera. As he does so, JUSTIN, 15, whips around.

Justin is tan with hair so buzzed and blonde that that it looks like an accidental sheen atop his head. He wears a tight white t-shirt and faded blue jeans. His laugh is wild and a bit too loud. Justin has an air of impatience and restlessness about him: he is always fidgeting, rocking, moving—the type of kid who puts firecrackers down chipmunk holes when he is bored.

JUSTIN

Ehh, there's your boyfriend.

Teddy straightens up and moves to stand by Jess, not looking at Justin. He and Jess exchange a glance.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

(to Jess)

He can't piss without you there to hold it for him.

JESS

Get out of here, Justin.

Justin swings the camera in vertical circles.

JUSTIN

It's a free country.

(pause)

Steal this from Plum, Ted?

TEDDY

No.

He swings the camera up and lets go. Teddy moves toward the falling camera, but Justin catches it before it hits the ground. Seeing Teddy's reaction, he pretends to drop it again and laughs.

JUSTIN

(to Teddy)

You're his special little bitch, aren't you.

(pause)

How much does this cost?

Teddy moves forward to grab the camera, but Justin jerks it back. He raises his eyes high enough to look at Justin's chest. Teddy's fists clench around the cuffs of his baggy sleeves. Justin continues to swing the camera.

TEDDY

Give it back.

JUSTIN

I could sell it.

JESS

We'll tell Mr. Plum.

JUSTIN

Who'll do what? Throw paint at me? Bead me
a necklace? I'm already out for the week.

(sniffs air)

Something smells like shit.

Justin focuses on Teddy, who still looks down. His face is red. Jess stiffens. Justin nudges
Teddy in the hip with the barrel of the BB gun.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

You smell like shit. What were you doing,
taking a shit in the woods?

JESS

Leave him alone.

JUSTIN

(to Teddy)

Or do I just scare you that much now?

Justin swings the camera up again.

JUSTIN

I should break it.

TEDDY

Give it—

JUSTIN

Get back at Plum for suspending me.

Justin prods Teddy in knees with his gun. Teddy flinches but remains looking downward
with fists balled. His lips are tight and flat.

JESS

That's your fault.

JUSTIN

No, it's Teddy's.

Justin helicopters the camera above his head. He walks several feet away from Teddy and
Jess, surveying the surroundings. He turns and smirks.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

You have to win it back.

JESS

What do you mean?

JUSTIN

Let's play Horse.

JESS

Horse? You got a basketball in there?

Jess nods her head at Justin's backpack.

JUSTIN

That's pussy Horse. We're gonna play real Horse. Adult Horse.

Justin waggles his BB gun in the air.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

I pick a target and then you have to shoot it. If you miss, you get a letter. First one to "horse" loses. If you lose, then I keep the camera.

TEDDY

(mutters)

I know how Horse works.

JUSTIN

Not how I play. Because when you get a letter you also have to take something off.

JESS

What?

JUSTIN

You know, your clothes, Koski. Your shirt, your pants. Like strip-poker.

Jess crosses her arms over her body and looks at Teddy, who watches Justin swing the camera.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

What, never taken your clothes off for a boy before?

JESS

You're disgusting.

JUSTIN

Teddy has.

Teddy tightens his mouth and looks at the ground. He balls up the sweatshirt sleeves into his fist. Jess looks at Teddy, and then eyes the gun Justin holds in his left hand.

JESS

What if I win?

JUSTIN

(guffaws)

What if you win?

Justin swings the camera and lets go of the strap when it reaches the peak of its arc. It sails upward and then drops back into Justin's right hand.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

The camera is yours.

Teddy shifts his weight, looking antsy to leave. He exchanges a glance with Jess.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

I'll sweeten the deal. Every time I miss, even if I'm choosing the target, I get a letter. That should make it...fair.

Justin takes off his backpack. He kneels down and rifles through the sack, revealing a second BB gun, a paintball gun, extra ammo, matches, firecrackers, and a six-pack of beer. Three crushed cans float in the mix. Justin lifts the second BB gun out of his backpack and points it to the sky.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

You in?

Teddy looks at the backpack then at the gun. His eyes then flick to the gravel road that leads away from the lake, back towards the sawmill, back towards town.

JESS

Yes.

Justin regards Jess, smirking. Teddy whips his head toward Jess and looks at her imploringly.

TEDDY

(whispering)

Jess...

Justin hands the gun, butt first, to Jess. She grabs it and tugs, but Justin wraps his hand over the barrel. He leans in and looks her in the eye.

JUSTIN

Remember— I got one too.

Justin releases his grip. Jess turns the gun over quickly, peers through the sight, and then examines the barrel.

JESS
Where's the clip?

Justin, surprised at her deftness with the gun, digs into his backpack and produces the clip. He hands it to her. The clip CLICKS when Jess loads it into the gun. Teddy watches her, glued to every movement.

Jess turns toward the lake and raises the gun to her face. She squints her eyes, looks through the sight, and tucks a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. The gun CRACKS and Teddy jumps. Justin, still crouched, raises his eyebrows. Jess lowers the gun and turns back toward the group, a breeze liberating the stubborn strand from behind her ear. She fights to keep back a smile. Teddy looks at her hands on the gun.

Justin lifts his gun from the ground, and points the barrel at Teddy.

JUSTIN
You need a warm-up, too?

Teddy shakes his head. Justin turns away and surveys the property. Every so often, his eyes flick back to Jess. Her gun is pointed downward, but her finger sits on the trigger. Justin points to a dead birch at the edge of the woods. White bark peels off the trunk in sheaves.

JUSTIN (CON'T)
I go first.

Justin raises and peers through the sight. He squints and shoots. The gun CRACKS.

EXT. EDGE OF WOODS – NIGHT

Shards of white bark fly off the tree.

EXT. LAKEFRONT – NIGHT

Justin smirks and bows, spreading his arms as if to say, "Be my guest." Jess eyes the tree, raises the gun, peers through the sight and aims.

Teddy watches her intently, rubbing the hem of his sweatshirt between his thumbs, the fabric unthreading. The gun POPS and he flinches.

EXT. EDGE OF WOODS – NIGHT

A hand-sized chunk of the rotten birch cracks off and falls to the ground.

EXT. LAKEFRONT – NIGHT

Jess lowers the gun and hands it to Teddy. He pushes back his sleeves and grabs the gun as if it were leaky dynamite. He gingerly lifts it to his eye, finds the sight, and bites his tongue.

JUSTIN

Don't shit yourself.

CLOSE-UP – TEDDY'S EYES

Teddy squints; his breathing quickens. When the gun POPS, Teddy shudders and squeezes his eyes shut.

Teddy opens his eyes. He sees the tree then turns toward Jess, who looks surprised. She nods.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

A retard coulda hit that.

Teddy hands the gun back to Jess. Justin readjusts his backpack and surveys the property again.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

(muttering)

Boring, boring, boring.

Justin eyes the sawmill buildings a quarter mile up the road and jerks his head towards a warehouse with paneled windows.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Up there.

Justin nudges Teddy with his gun.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Ladies first.

Teddy and Jess walk toward the gravel road. Justin follows, gun at the ready.

EXT. GRAVEL ROAD

Teddy and Jess crunch up the gravel toward the sawmill buildings. Justin follows. Teddy wipes his nose with his sweatshirt. The wind whooshes through the tall conifers, which sway and CREAK. Justin repeatedly pokes Teddy in the butt with his gun.

JUSTIN

Like that, Ted? Huh? Betcha do.

Jess finally whips around.

JESS

Stop it.

JUSTIN

Come on, Ted. Hit back. Hit back just once.

Teddy tightens his mouth but remains looking forward.

EXT. WAREHOUSE – NIGHT

The light fades and the sky darkens. The apricot and rose hues disappear: it is no longer dusk. Justin, Teddy, and Jess near the warehouse, which is grey, wooden, dilapidated. There are gaping holes where windows used to be. Saplings grow from the gutters and vines crawl up the walls.

Several automatic floodlights, meant to discourage trespassers, turn on and occasionally flicker. Justin points to a row of paneled windows illuminated by the light, some of which are already broken and jagged. He turns to Jess and Teddy.

JUSTIN

Glass windowpane. Top right.

Justin raises his gun and shoots. The gun POPS. One panel of the window SHATTERS.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Let's see it, Koski.

Jess raises her gun and takes several moments to aim.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Something tells me I'm gonna see some skin.

Jess shoots. A windowpane SHATTERS. She lowers the gun slowly. She smirks at Justin and hands the gun to Teddy. Teddy eyes the window. He raises the gun and aims. His arms tremble.

CLOSE-UP - TEDDY'S FACE

A breeze lifts his hair. Teddy closes his eyes; the gun POPS, and then silence. His face falls and he turns around to face Jess and Justin. Justin gloats.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

H.

Teddy passes the gun to Jess and bends down to untie his shoes.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Shoes don't count.

JESS

Do too.

JUSTIN

This is my game. My rules.

(pause)

Ted. H.

Teddy takes off his ratty grey sweatshirt and reveals a thin, white undershirt. A yellowing bruise is partially visible on his upper arm. Teddy balls up the sweatshirt and hugs it close to his chest. Justin watches him disrobe.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

There we go.

Teddy looks down at his feet and hugs the sweatshirt closer. The bruise disappears under the sleeve of the undershirt. Jess turns to Justin.

JESS

Just pick another target.

JUSTIN

Hold your horses, babe.

Justin surveys the area. He spots a sign near the gravel road that says "Jansen Sawmill."

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Okay. I got one for ya.

Justin takes a few steps in the direction of the sign. He raises the gun, peers through the sight, and shoots. The gun CRACKS, followed by silence.

JUSTIN

Shit.

Justin turns to face Teddy and Jess, scowling. Jess points to his shirt.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

I'm playing kiddie rules. I almost forgot.

Justin sets down his gun, throws off his backpack, and yanks off his t-shirt, revealing a tanned, trim adolescent body. An old scar, textured like a zipper, curves along his ribcage. Teddy notices it. Justin slings his backpack over his shoulder and picks up his gun.

JUSTIN

I'll get you shitheads back, don't worry.

Justin nods at Jess, indicating for her to pick a target. She spots a rusted "NO TRESPASSING" sign at the other edge of the sawmill property, barely illuminated by the flickering floodlights. The sign is rusted and faded with boxy red lettering. Several gunshots pockmark the metal.

Jess frowns and turns to Teddy, who she knows must make the shot. He avoids her eyes. Jess takes several moments before raising the gun. She aims and shoots. The gun POPS, followed by the METALLIC RINGING SOUND of the BB hitting the sign. She hands Teddy the gun. He refuses to look her in the eye.

Teddy lifts the gun and squints through the sight. The breeze swells and he hears the surrounding conifers whisper.

CLOSE-UP - TEDDY'S FACE

Teddy grimaces and closes his eyes. The gun POPS, and then SILENCE. Teddy pries open his right eye, then his left.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

I think she wants to see some skin, Ted.

Teddy places the gun on the ground and yanks his t-shirt over his head, revealing a blotchy, wine colored bruise on his hip. It's about the size of a hand. Jess gapes. Teddy bunches the t-shirt with the sweatshirt and hugs the ball to his chest, trying to cover the bruise.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

These targets are crap.

Justin's eyes land on a floodlight attached to one of the warehouses. He lifts the gun and aims. The gun CRACKS and the floodlight SHATTERS, darkening the scene. He spits and vigorously rubs a line in the sandy earth before returning to Jess.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

From the line.

JESS

That's not fair! You had light.

JUSTIN

Want the camera or not?

In a huff, Jess steps to the line. She raises the gun and peers through the sight. It's difficult to see the shattered light in the dark. As she aims, Justin sidles up to Teddy— two lean, scarred bodies side by side in the moonlight. Justin speaks loud enough so that Jess can hear.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

You ever see your girlfriend naked before?

Justin elbows Teddy in his bruised side. Teddy folds over slightly.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Hey. You ever get inside that?

CLOSE-UP - JESS'S FACE

Jess grits her teeth and tries to focus on the broken floodlight.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Or are you a faggot?

The gun CRACKS. Shards of the light fall and smash onto the ground. Justin looks impressed. Jess turns around and hands the gun to Teddy.

JESS

(to Justin)

There's nothing left for him to shoot.

JUSTIN

Shoulda missed then.

Teddy pads up to the line. Gooseflesh forms on his upper arms, beading the yellowed skin of his bruise. He raises the gun and shoots. The GUN CRACKS, and a glass panel next to the light BREAKS.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

H-O-R.

Teddy places the gun on the ground and slowly undoes the silver button on his shorts. As he pulls them to his ankles, Justin snorts. Teddy wears tight white underwear. Gooseflesh crawls up his thighs. Jess bows her head and pretends to be engrossed in the dirt.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Look at that.

Justin elbows Jess and points the barrel of his gun at Teddy's groin.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Glad I got a camera.

Justin takes off his backpack and slips out the camera. He hangs it around his neck and holds it up to his face. He adjusts the lens and CLICKS buttons.

JUSTIN

You can give this one to Plum.

The camera CLICKS.

JUSTIN

You can give this one to your dad.

The camera CLICKS.

JUSTIN

And this one's for me.

Teddy finally slips his legs out of the shorts and places them on the ground beside him. He stands in his tall, white tube socks, tennis shoes, and underwear. He looks pale and vulnerable. Justin saunters up towards him with the camera. He lifts the viewfinder to his eyes.

JUSTIN

Oh my God, I can see your balls.

Jess, embarrassed and not quite sure what to do, angles herself toward the woods. She does not want to look at Teddy, nor does she want to ignore what is happening with him. She speaks from over her shoulder.

JESS

Stop.

JUSTIN

Don't you like seeing your boyfriend's balls?

JESS

You're sick.

JUSTIN

(to Teddy)

I'll take a picture for your girlfriend, too.

The camera CLICKS several times before Justin lets it fall to his chest.

JESS

Pick a target already. A better one.

JUSTIN

Don't worry, Koski. I got it.

EXT. EDGE OF WOODS – NIGHT

Justin jogs towards the woods. He slips off his backpack, sets it down on the ground, and procures three full beer cans. He lines them up on a mossy, rotting log.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Jess turns to Teddy, who trembles in the cold.

JESS

Try not to close your eyes.

Teddy nods. The daylight is nearly faded. Moths flit in the air. They hear frogs CROAKING and WHIRRING. Jess looks at the bruise on his hip. His face is turned away from hers.

TEDDY

We're going to lose.

Teddy looks toward the gravel road. Justin approaches them. He waves his hand toward the log.

JUSTIN

That fair enough for you?

JESS

It's fine.

JUSTIN

It better be.

Justin aims and shoots. The blue can farthest to the left EXPLODES and shards of aluminum fly. Froth spills over the log and onto the sandy ground, which absorbs the beer quickly. Justin fist pumps.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Yeah!

Jess takes her gun. The wind picks up and the dark conifers sway. The night deepens. Katydid and spring peepers THRUM. Teddy shivers.

Jess takes aim. Justin watches her intently. The breeze lifts her hair and goose bumps form on the flesh of her upper arms. Jess pulls the trigger.

The middle can EXPLODES. She turns around and hands the gun to Teddy, who takes it limply in his hands. He peers into the darkness toward the log when Justin comes up behind him, nearly touching.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

So, what'll your dad do when you come home naked?

Teddy tightens his grip on the gun and tries to focus on his target. He squints; his finger hovers on the trigger. He bites his chapped lower lip.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

I know what mine would do.

Teddy readjusts the gun and sinks his teeth farther into his lip.

JESS

Leave him alone.

JUSTIN

(stepping away, to JESS)

Can't I give Ted a pep talk?

Justin walks back and stands uncomfortably close next to Jess, who scowls and shrinks from him. Teddy grips the gun silently for a few moments. He inhales, and then exhales. He squints. Suddenly, a CRACK.

The last can still remains on the log. Teddy exhales and tightens his lips. The CRICKETS WAIL. Justin smiles and taps the camera around his neck.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

I got my camera ready.

Justin walks toward Teddy, camera raised. Jess steps toward him.

JESS

Your dad fucked you up good.

Justin turns back toward Jess. The amusement melts from his face.

JUSTIN

What?

JESS

What's this, his third DUI?

Justin lets the camera fall to his chest and walks up to Jess. He gets in her face and his hands tighten on the gun.

JUSTIN
What the hell do you know?

JESS
That poor girl--

JUSTIN
(interrupts JESS)
You want one of these bullets in your face?

TEDDY
Stop.

Justin whips around to look at Teddy.

JUSTIN
Took you long—

Everyone hears the SCREECHING and COOING of raccoons. Justin freezes and raises his gun. Teddy's eyes flick toward the warehouse with the shot-out windows. He sees movement. A trio of raccoons pad out a hole in the wall and down toward the lake. One lags behind the rest.

JUSTIN (CON'T)
A real target.

Without thinking, Justin raises the gun, aims and shoots the lagging raccoon four times. It YELPS and slumps, but continues to stumble down to the lake as the rest scatter. Suddenly, it stops.

Teddy's face crumples.

JESS
(in a shrill voice)
It was doing nothing to you!

Justin pays no attention to Jess and sidles up next to Teddy. They are close enough to be touching.

JUSTIN
Finish it off and you can keep your clothes on.

The light from the rising moon reflects the wetness on Teddy's face. He wipes his bare arm underneath his nose, leaving a snail trail of moisture.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Finish it and I'll give you back your camera.

Justin lifts the camera off his neck.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

I promise.

Teddy raises his gun. His arms tremble, his eyes are pinched, and he sinks his teeth into his lower lip, which is speckled with blood.

Lightning bugs ignite around Teddy in the dark. He aims at the dark lump. The WHIRRING AND CHIRPING of frogs and crickets reaches a fever pitch.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Let's get closer.

Justin walks ahead of Teddy, and they creep twenty paces to the raccoon. Justin stops and nods.

Teddy sucks in his breath and looks toward the raccoon. His finger dances and taps the trigger, hesitating.

The gun POPS. Dirt flies up near Justin's feet and he jumps. Teddy peels off towards the warehouses with the gun. Jess bolts after him.

JUSTIN (CON'T)

Hey!

Justin throws down the camera. He sprints after them, clutching his gun, and then slows. He watches them approach a building with a large conveyer belt.

EXT. SAWMILL BUILDING – NIGHT

Jess splits off from Teddy. Panting, she crouches and gathers a handful of rocks and shoves them in her pockets. She looks behind her shoulder.

Teddy tries to open the door to the building. It is locked. He looks around. An old conveyer belt leading to the second story window stands outside the building. Like everything at the sawmill, it is rusted and overgrown with weeds and saplings. Teddy crouches beneath it, breathing heavy and hugging the gun to his chest.

RUSTLING and FOOTSTEPS. Teddy whips around, eyes wide and gun pointed up. Jess freezes. Teddy lowers the gun and she crouches beside him.

JESS

Give me the gun.

Shots POP. They are random. Some in quick succession; others, far apart. Jess and Teddy freeze. The sounds get closer. A shot DINGS as it hits the conveyer belt above them. Teddy raises the gun to his chin and hugs it close.

Justin walks towards Jess and Teddy, gun at the ready. It is difficult to see anything but his white t-shirt in the dark. He raises the gun.

JUSTIN

Give it to me.

TEDDY'S P.O.V. – JUSTIN

as he approaches Teddy and Jess.

BACK TO SCENE

CLOSE-UP – TEDDY'S FACE

Teddy peers into the sight. His eyes are open. A shot POPS. Justin screams, clutching his face with both hands. He staggers away from the conveyer belt, howling.

JUSTIN

My eye! My eye!

Jess leaps up and bolts toward the warehouse with the paneled windows. Teddy, stunned, follows her, still clutching the gun.

EXT. WAREHOUSE – NIGHT

As they run, the WHIRRING noise of crickets and frogs encompasses Teddy and Jess. They sprint to where they left their clothes, arms pumping and their feet spitting up sand and gravel. One nearly naked, one fully clothed. They stop once they see Teddy's clothes, double over and pant.

JUSTIN

(O.S.)

My eye!

Jess picks up the undershirt and throws it at Teddy. He shivers violently, puts down the BB gun, and pulls on the undershirt and sweatshirt. He puts on his pants. With each heaving breath, his rib cage shows. Jess watches him put on his clothes.

JESS

I'll say I shot him.

Teddy does not respond. He stares back at the conveyer belt.

JESS (CON'T)
It'll be better if I say I did it.

Jess looks over her shoulder toward the warehouses. They hear Justin MOAN.

JESS (CON'T)
He might be coming.

Teddy jogs a few yards away. He sees a dark lump and bends down to pick it up. It's the camera. He turns it over in his hands. He runs his index finger over the lens. It is cracked.

Jess hears another MOAN in the distance. She looks around anxiously.

JESS (CON'T)
We need to go.

Teddy jogs back to Jess and hands her the camera. He picks up the gun and runs off towards the lake.

JESS (CON'T)
Teddy!

Jess, still breathing hard, watches him leave. She hears RUSTLING and whips around but cannot discern anything in the darkness. She looks in Teddy's direction. The wind picks up and the conifers sway.

EXT. NEAR LAKEFRONT — NIGHT

Teddy SWISHES and CRUNCHES through the grass, looking for something. He hears RASPY BREATHING, walks over to a tuft of brush and stops. He stares down at the dying raccoon. It lies on its side in the brush, panting. The soft paunch of its abdomen pumps up and down; dark blood leaks from the open mouth. The raccoon's eyes are open, black, wild, rolling.

The moisture on Teddy's brow, under his eyes, and beneath his nose catches the light of the moon and stars. He brings the gun up to his face and peers through the sight.

EXT. WAREHOUSE – NIGHT

Four SHOTS ring out. Jess jumps. She looks back to the sawmill, but does not see anything. No Justin. Lightning bugs flare like sprites around her. She clutches the camera closer to her body and looks toward the lake.

EXT. NEAR LAKE FRONT — NIGHT

Teddy wipes his arm under his nose under his arm. He takes ragged breaths in and out, trying to control his breathing. Teddy stares at the dark lump on the ground for several drawn out moments. He rubs the back of his hand against his eyes, sucks down a sob, and looks up at the stars. The NIGHT CHORUS of frogs, crickets, and katydids crescendos.

JESS
(O.S.)

Teddy!

Teddy turns and runs away from the raccoon, toward Jess, toward the gravel road, gripping the barrel of the BB gun in his right hand.

FADE OUT.

THE END

LAKE TILSON

They found Joey Sinfone the morning after he killed himself washed up on someone else's beach, his body marooned between a plastic shovel and a wet towel. The paper says he first sat on the raft in the lake, slid his father's fillet knife across one wrist, and then swam out as far as he could, draining himself as he went.

This was six days ago. I dangle my legs off the pier and look at Lake Tilson. It's so low that the pontoons are beached, tethered to piers like patient dogs. A band of sand rims the lake like margarita salt and connects everyone's yards together in a golden ribbon. It's been a dry summer, and the lake needs rain. Not blood.

The whole area, the whole damn UP, is aflame with the news. What the papers don't say and what the locals only know is that Joey, the week before, was seen with some Chicago boy, the tourist type with weak arms, together in his truck. I went to high school with Joey and worked with him at the Dari Maid filling cones. Joey and I used to write swear words in ketchup on the burger patties, hoping that one day somebody would notice. No one ever did.

I hear the crunch of gravel signaling that a car has come to dock at the access and readjust my "Save the Lakes" hat over my ponytail. I turn around and motion the driver to stop before he sinks his boat into the water. He and his friend get out, both wearing camo hats. Probably from the mainland.

"Hello, sir," I say. "I'm an intern working with the DNR to check boats for invasive species like the zebra mussel and spiny water flea. Everyone has to undergo an inspection before docking in Lake Tilson. Mind if I take a look?"

The driver merely jerks his head at the boat, and I begin examining the hull.

"Going out to catch some fish today?"

He grunts and nods. The fisherman then sticks a meaty thumb out toward the lake and leans toward his buddy. “This here is where that boy killed himself.” His friend nods. The fisherman hikes up his jeans, but his heft still spills over his brown belt. From where I am checking the boat, it looks like the thin leather will soon be engulfed and disappear. “Sounds like he was doing some fishy stuff.” He gives side-eye to his buddy as they shuffle and stare off into the lake.

I finish my sweep and find nothing. “I’m sorry sir, but by the looks of the bottom of the boat, your engine may be infected with zebra mussels. You’re going to have to let it sit for five days, flush the engine, and clean the bottom.”

His smile disappears and his face has taken on the countenance of an angry meatball.

“Like hell I am. You can eat off my boat, it’s so clean.”

“You can’t be spreading invasive species, sir. Here.” I take a trifold pamphlet from my back pocket and hand it to him. “I’m sorry, I can’t let you in today. Five days.”

He crumples the glossy brochure and turns to face his buddy, muttering something about the “goddamn DNR.” They get in the truck and pull away, and I walk back out onto the pier.

I squint my eyes and try to see my house on the other side of the lake. I live on a mucky cove where all the carp come, and it is hard to see my place behind the bend. I want to see Teddy on the shoreline, but I see nothing. Just the drought’s sandy noose tightening its grip around the lake. I sit down on the pier again and pick at the dried seaweed between the wood planks, feeling beads of sweat migrating down my back.

Teddy and I just *are*, and we always have been. We aren’t friends because friends have to meet, and I never met Teddy because I’ve always known him. He lives a ways down my road in a mobile home, and unlike me and most everyone that lives up here, he doesn’t live on a lake. Instead, Teddy’s yard has old engines and rusted out cars covered by tall grass and banana spiders. The steel is his dad’s; the spiders are his.

He first showed me the pitcher plants when we were fourteen after I had gotten him his birthday gift, *Vegetation of Michigan's Upper Peninsula*. He stole his dad's waders for me and we both trudged out to the mucky area on my side of Lake Tilson.

Jess, look at these! They're carnivorous, you know. An insect falls into its "pitcher" and can't get out. Its digestive juices eat it up.

God, Teddy, don't stick your finger in there!

Teddy liked the idea of plants slurping flies and drowning wasps. In fact, he just liked plants. I told him to apply to the school where I got my running scholarship, where he could study more than just the ruby-throated pitcher plant.

I'll wait around here for a while. Figure things out first.

We always came back to that spot on my side of the lake to see the pitcher plants in bloom. But not this summer.

We haven't spoken since the night of Torie's graduation party, which was the first weekend in June. We pretended we were drunk and ran to the old changing house on my side of the lake—a remnant from Tilson's resort days. I wanted him to sleep with me. Instead, he told me he was joining the military.

I look around. There's nobody here, and there aren't even boats on the lake. I get up and walk over to the admission hut and hand my boss, Dan, the actual DNR man, the glossy pamphlets. I tell him I am leaving early.

"You all right, Jess?" he asks. Dan knows I pull shifts at the Dari Maid and like everyone else in town, knows that Joey worked there too. I like Dan, and I am lucky to work for him. The sun has burned his buzz-cut blonde, he's got a wicked sock tan, and when he smiles, one side of his mouth

goes farther back than the other. Dan's one of the only men in town you won't find at the Tilson Tap on a Friday night; he's out jigging a neon yellow worm in the lake, teaching his little girl how to reel in a walleye. Sometimes I hear them from my pier at night, their muted chatter floating to me across the surface of the placid black water.

I look up at Dan and see that even his frown is lopsided. My heart curls into a tight ball so I tear my eyes away and begin to unpin my nametag. "Yeah, I need to run to Trig's to pick up a gift. It's a friend's birthday today." I poke my thumb on the sharp point and a bead of red appears. It burns as my sweat mingles with the wound, and I am thankful for the distraction. "Thanks for asking, though."

I hand him my nametag and he stashes it the box under the counter with the extra packs of gum and dead pens. He reaches a hand across the counter top. "Are you sure?"

I nod and fiddle with the house keys in my pocket. The cool metal feels good against my stinging thumb. "I'll see you Monday, Dan. Tell Chelsea hi for me." The bells on the door chime as I slip out of the booth and begin my walk to Trig's.

Dan was on one of the rescue boats that searched the lake when Joey's parents first discovered Joey was missing. He hasn't been out on the lake since.

*

I grasp the orchid in my left hand and ring the doorbell with my right, even though I can see through the screen into the kitchen. Someone rustles in the living room.

"Come in, come in, I saw you coming down the drive."

I open the door and wait for John, Teddy's dad, to emerge from his couch in the living room. His mom is never home during the day because she works. I think she prefers it that way.

John clears his throat and shuffles in as I count the thirteen cigarette stains on the linoleum. I raise my head to look at him and his sunken eyes, his leathery skin.

“Mr. Olssen, I’m sorry—”

He cuts me off with a wave of his hand. “Ted’s not here. Decided to work another shift today.”

He coughs. John’s cough sounds like rust. I imagine small flaky shards of orange erupting out of his mouth like confetti, dusting the air, crumbling on his sleeve like potato chips. He worked in the copper mine from the time he was seventeen to the time they closed down, about ten years ago. He’s smoked the whole damn time.

“What the hell’s that?” John frowns and nods his head at my hands. “Some damn flower?”

I look down at the orchid like I don’t know I am holding it. “Yes, kind of. It’s an orchid. They’re special and don’t grow around here. I thought Teddy might find it interesting because they were mentioned in a book we had to read for school.”

“Jesus Christ. A flower. My son wants a goddamn flower.”

John hacks again, this time turning away from the table and walking toward the kitchen. He grabs both sides of the sink and stares into the drain. “You want a glass or something? To put that thing in?”

I look down at the orchid again, this time like I am expecting it to reply. “Uh, no. No, it’s all right. I want to get it to Teddy himself. Maybe I’ll just wait till after work, you know, go drive there tonight.”

John clears his throat and spits into the sink. I remember all the times that I had gone to wash a dish in Teddy’s kitchen and had seen dollops of brown phlegm oozing across a fork or into a bowl. I tighten my grip around the small plastic tube of water that encases the orchid’s stem.

“Well, I—“

John turns around from the sink and wipes his mouth with the back of his crumpled hand. He can’t make a fist or stick his hand out straight for a handshake. His thumb and first two fingers

always jut out like oak branches, frozen in crooked disfigurement. He never told Teddy why, never talked about it. They now gleam, wet with the spittle from his lips.

“Military’ll shape him up. Just you see. Don’t tolerate no pussies there, now. Best decision Ted’s made, that’s for goddamn sure.” John looks at me with searching eyes, and I feel sick. They are the same green as Teddy’s with none of the softness but all of the intensity. I know he is examining me, looking to pin something down, to see me flinch. I have nothing to show.

“Well, thank you, Mr. Olssen, I should probably get going home for dinner before it gets dark. I’ll give this to Teddy later.”

I give him a terse smile and he nods, still staring. I turn around, eyes fixed on the yellowing linoleum that is leading me to the screen door.

“Keep your head on straight down there at school.”

I hold up my hand as a sort of acknowledgment or dismissal, I don’t know which. The screen door slams and bounces off the frame as I run down the steps.

*

The night is achingly dry. It is so dry that I stand here in my driveway and wait for the fireflies to explode, to burst into flame. I imagine it would be like popcorn. First one starts and then they all go. *Pop, pop, pop*. Their tiny light bulbs setting the dark aflame.

I delicately unfold the curled over top of the brown lunch bag I am holding to make sure the orchid is still there and relatively unscathed. No petals have fallen, no leaves have broken off. I crimp the top back over and immediately as I do so, contemplate checking it again. Maybe it’s bent. Did I pinch a petal when I rolled the top of the bag?

The walk into town feels long, and every step of the way, I hold the bag out from my body, pushing it away to protect it.

The Dari Maid is deserted. The neon sign is off, the red plastic cup scrawled with the word “Tips” is gone, collected, put away. A tall parking lot light, the type with the dog piss yellow plastic covering, stands in the gravel parking lot. Moths flutter and swarm in the glow; the dumb ones make tapping noises against the plastic, burning their swollen bodies. I see Teddy’s car, an old white one he inherited from his dead grandpa, sitting just outside of the light. I don’t see Teddy in it.

I run up to the car, gravel flying out beneath my feet. I squash my face against the driver’s window and see nothing. I rap my knuckles on the glass. “Teddy!” He twitches in the foot space of the back seat, but doesn’t turn to look at me even as I open the door. I know he’s crying, and he’s crying hard. I put the paper bag on the front seat and crawl into the back with him.

I say his name again and gently tug his body up from the floor. He’s like an armadillo curled over on himself and won’t open up. “Teddy.” I slip my hands under his ribs and notice how his spine shows through his light blue Dari Maid t-shirt. He gives a little and pushes himself up. Dirt and sand from the floor are embedded in his forearms. He won’t look at me—God, he still can’t look at me. Teddy rubs the entire length of his forearm under his nose, leaving a snail trail of moisture to harden in the night air.

I gather his head into my chest, pretending that there is something there to comfort him, to soften the fall. There isn’t, just a sports bra and an array of bones. He doesn’t care, though, and lets me place my hand on his slender neck, my thumb resting in the little hollow just below his hairline. I smooth and unsmooth the soft small hairs, memorizing the curve of his skull, thinking of June.

*

I wrapped my arms around his torso and tugged on his waist until it met mine. *We need to do this for ourselves. For both of us.*

Teddy parted his lips; his mouth dangled like a fish on a string.

Teddy. My hand migrated to the front of his jeans. He pushed away.

Jesus, Jess, what the hell! What are you doing?

We need this.

I signed into the service today.

What the fuck! Are you kidding me, Teddy, are you fucking kidding me?

Why is it so hard to believe, Jess?

You can't shoot a goddamn deer, Teddy. Like hell you miss every time. Even John knows that.

I'll be fine.

No you won't, Teddy. No you won't! They're going to fucking eat you alive.

I'm doing this. I need to do this.

You need? For what, your fucked up father?

You know nothing, Jess.

*

My shirt grows damp where Teddy's head is. The cicadas' whine escalates into unbearable screeching and all I want to do is join them. I look out the foggy car window because I can't look at Teddy. I don't want to see his scrunched face, his glistening nostrils, his red cheeks. They already wound me. Teddy isn't crying for me. Those tears aren't for us. How could I think his silence was because of me? Anger has always sifted through Teddy like a sieve—in and out. Love, on the other hand isn't so fleeting.

Teddy's shoulders heave and he mangles another sob in his throat. I am reminded of pitcher plants, their long graceful necks, the crimson of their throats. I think of the tiny, downward pointing hairs that make it impossible to crawl out. I think of climbing up and sliding down, climbing up and sliding down.

In the darkness, I shift and pull Teddy's head from my chest and wrap my arms around his neck, smelling cheap burgers and greasy fries. I can pretend all I want, say this is all because of

college, of change, of this godforsaken town. No, no. Teddy isn't crying for us; he isn't crying for me. It isn't about those things. It never was.

*

We drive back in silence. I take the wheel of his grandpa's car because Teddy is a mess and he'd probably drive off the road. He doesn't argue, but looks out through the open window. The Dari-Maid is on the other side of Lake Tilson, so the water follows us all the way back. Sometimes it appears as a sliver through the trees, sometimes as a yawning gap of darkness bordered by sand. I glance at Teddy. He feels so small and quiet, and I can hardly bear it.

"Teddy."

He won't turn his head to look at me; he won't take his eyes off that damn lake. The wind from the window lifts his hair, but still, he won't move.

"Did Ron make you a sundae today?" All employees at the Dari Maid got a free sundae with as many toppings as they could stomach on their birthdays, courtesy of the manager. Last year, I made Teddy and Joey help me with mine, which consisted of a chocolate fudge pond and a mountain of fruit loops. I know he remembers this as soon as I ask him the question, and I feel the air thicken in anticipation of his response.

"No. I didn't want one."

I tighten my grip on the driving wheel. "Did your mom get you anything?"

Teddy talks to the wind coming through the window. "I—I haven't seen her today." His voice catches but still, he doesn't move.

"Oh."

I hate myself for not knowing what to say. But this isn't my job, this isn't fair. I knew Joey, too, but here I am, forced to have the steady hands, to drive the car, to say the words.

I pull into the gravel driveway and turn off the car. We both stare at the windshield as if we are expecting it to shatter or explode. Nothing happens, and I feel something fall very deeply within me.

Teddy gets out first and shuts the car door. I grab the brown bag I had stashed by my feet and do the same, angry and afraid he might disappear.

“Will I see you tomorrow? I am packing up the car, but that won’t take the whole day.” I try to restrain the supplication in my voice.

Teddy won’t look at me. He looks down at the gravel. “I have the early lunch shift tomorrow.”

“Oh.” I am suddenly choking on marbles and can’t say anything more. I am unable to beg, unable to plead, unable to paw at his light blue t-shirt like a child and cry until he gives. Instead I hand him the brown paper bag, and he takes it gently in his hands. His face is still pink, and I imagine one swipe of his hand would smear all the freckles away.

“Happy birthday, Teddy.”

For a second I catch the flash of his eyes. But it is momentary, and soon he turns away and they die like a star.

Teddy walks slowly to his house. I watch him until I hear the screen door close.

Once I reach home, I walk down the slope of my backyard to the lake and stand on the edge of the bank, curling my toes over the grassy edge. If I leaned over far enough, and if it weren’t so dry, the bank would collapse and I would hit water. By me, there is no sandy beach, no comfortable ease into Tilson. Just a mucky, weedy, steep drop. For this reason, my side of the lake wasn’t ever considered the swimming side— too many weeds, too pond-like. As a kid, I never minded; it kept people away, and I alone could reign over Lake Tilson’s other depths, the water that summer smoldered orange with pine tannin.

Tilson is black now: inky, extinguished. I watch for the lake to betray a silver-tipped wrinkle in the water or to reflect a star overhead, but it remains guarded and resolutely tight-lipped. I hop down off of the bank and into damp silt and walk on what was once water to the place he once brought me.

*

I never told Teddy that I saw them that night. It was in July, the heart of the time we weren't speaking, and I had gotten in the habit of taking my runs at night just so I could pass his house, seeing but unseen. Usually I just saw John and Mary—John swinging a twisted hand in the air, Mary at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. Sometimes I caught glimpses of Teddy as he drifted from room to room or washed the dishes, head bent in concentration or despair. Sometimes I saw nothing and just heard the chortling of the raccoons under his porch.

It was late when I saw them, and the night was thick with cricket chorus. I heard a car idling in Teddy's driveway and froze before I could reach it. *Shit shit shit*. I slipped into the woods alongside the road, crouched, and tried to peer into his yard. Joey and Teddy were sitting in Joey's truck. The windows were closed, and I could hear the engine panting under the strain of the air conditioning. They must have just gotten off the last shift together, but I didn't know why Joey drove him home. I didn't know why Teddy didn't take his own car. But there he was, sitting shotgun in the Chevy of a boy who would kill himself a month later.

He was smiling. Teddy always looks down at his feet when he smiles, and then he looks back up. All I needed to see was the back of his head bobbing and knew. Joey unclipped his seatbelt and leaned over. Teddy looked down again. Joey's face looked strained like he was working out an equation in his head. His hand came up, and he touched Teddy's face.

I closed my eyes and imagined the muscles of his torso tightening, the fine hairs on his upper lip glistening and shaking. In that moment, something like a zag of lightning tore from my chest to my gut. And I know Teddy felt the same.

Joey's hand recoiled in midair when Teddy turned his head away. It hung there, suspended as if by a string, a boy hanging on the end of a rope. Before Teddy had the chance to unlock the door, I slipped onto the road and bolted back from where I came. The crickets never wailed so loudly.

*

The sphagnum moss has turned into a welcome mat, the type with the pointy beige bristles that collects the mud from your shoes. I try bouncing on it, but it's hard and brittle. No rain means the lake recedes, and when the lake recedes, the moss is sucked dry.

I look a little farther down along the lake at a dark mass on the shore. The cluster was much bigger when Teddy first took me to see them, but they're still here, holding on, surviving. I take a step forward. *No, no.* I can't see how they've withered and shrunken. My limbs grow heavy at the thought, and I lie down.

The coarse moss cushions my body as I ease to the ground, and I feel pinpricks of water—droplets that have somehow survived—poke through the back of my t-shirt and wet my skin. I lay my head down and face the lake.

I half expect Joey's body, pale and bloated, to wash up on shore next to me, for his body to come lie next to mine. I'd welcome him, lay my head on his distended belly, listen to the lake water churn in his gut. I'd beg him to tell me. Tell me everything. I'd scream. *Somebody talk to me, Joey.*

Goddamn, just somebody talk.

The shore remains still, and I listen to the lake lap. It feels far away, fading, weak. The sand belt rimming the lake muffles the sound and keeps it at a distance, threatening to silence the water entirely. *Inhale.* I take another breath of night air. A tension begins to creep through me, emanating

from a tight ball which throbs somewhere in my chest. *Exhale*. I close my eyes and try to collect the remaining sound of the lake in my ears, pretending to be a seashell. A conch. One of those big ones with the apricot spiny shell and the pink glazed inside. Teddy had one sitting in the bookcase in his room, some cheap souvenir, a flea market find. We played with it a lot as kids.

I hear a sea lion.

Teddy, don't be dumb, you're just supposed to hear the ocean.

But I do, I do! Come on, Jess, just listen.

All I hear is the ocean, Teddy.

I think of the orchid in the paper bag and Teddy in the car and Joey's blood in the lake and bury my forehead in the sphagnum, my body heaving, wracked by sobs. I curl over onto my other side and look at the dark cluster further down shore. Somehow they've clung on, somehow they've endured.

Maybe it's a magic shell, Jess. Maybe I am the only one who can hear them.

I close my eyes and picture the pitcher plants, their maws opened to the heavens, waiting for rain, waiting for something to wet their tongues and let them sing.

PORTAGE LAKE

This is how the night ends: Teddy's hands knotted and sticky with vomit, mine sweaty and clutching the keys to his geriatric, snowbound Pontiac. We stand in his mustard-colored kitchen, his face blood-crusted and purpling and mine, scored raw from walking headlong, scarfless, into a northern Michigan wind. We are both melting. Snow slides off our hoods and shoes and pools on the cigarette stained floor. This is the year the lakes demand something from everyone in Tilton: boats and cars, rafts and urns, wedding rings and boys. We are sixteen, liars, and although we don't know it yet, tonight the ice will groan and give under Finn Taylor on Portage Lake.

The canned applause of a game show rerun filters through the kitchen. I peer into the living room.

Teddy's father sits in his golden chair in front of the TV, awash in pale blue light. The light moves and morphs, dancing across John Olssen's pale skin: darkening, lightening, bobbing with the shifting images of the screen. A pack of cigarettes sits on the coffee table next to the lamp. I hear an audience clap, the ticking, clicking, roll of a giant moneyed wheel. The cigarette pinched between his fingers sends pale snakes of smoke up toward the ceiling.

"Didn't see the headlights coming up the drive." He summons a cough like gravel up his throat, eyes fixed on the TV. Mr. Olssen does not turn to look at Teddy and me. He taps the cigarette on the toothy edge of a brown plastic tray. Ash piles like snow.

I breathe and summon my words. "Yeah, we—we got in an accident."

"An accident." Mr. Olssen wheels his head towards us. His cigarette hand remains poised in the air. Mr. Olssen knows all about accidents. Since leaving work at the copper mine, he fixes up cars, boats, and motors for townies and brave tourists. Rusted up cars and Mercury motors loiter like tired vagrants around the burn pit and work shed in his backyard.

“A deer jumped out into the road, and I swerved. We hit a tree.”

“*You* swerved?” Mr. Olssen does not look at me. Instead, he stares at his son, who stands like a storm-raked tree next to me. Teddy gazes at a spot on the carpeting between the kitchen and the TV, lips sucked tight into his mouth. The wheel ticks in the background. *Big money big money big money!*

“Yeah. I was driving Teddy’s car.” In my coat pocket, I dig the point of Teddy’s keys into the meat of my palm. The metal is hot and moist, sharp but not sharp enough. “He was teaching me stick.”

“Huh.” Mr. Olssen reaches the end of his cigarette and stabs it into the ashtray. He compresses the bud until it buckles and collapses. “That ain’t Ted’s car.”

I shoot a glance at Teddy. His eyes still gaze downward, lips still sucked tight into his mouth, willing his breath not to sail so far. He is bracing himself, trying not to sway.

Mr. Olssen’s fingers hover above the graveyard of contorted, spineless cigarettes. “I paid for half of that Pontiac.” He looks at Teddy, the light from the TV highlighting the sunken architecture of his face. “Ted owes me half.”

A whirlpool of dread churns in my gut. Teddy had told me that the taupe Pontiac with the bad milk smell and busted tape player was *his, his his*. This was his favorite thing about it.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Olssen. Once summer comes around, I promise I’ll pay you back. I don’t have the money now, but I will.”

“Where’s the car?” Behind Mr. Olssen, a woman on TV holds up a glittery placard. She won Aruba, money, a cruise. Something nice, expensive, surprising.

“Off highway B.” Teddy’s voice comes out husky and strained. He wipes his nose again. “In a ditch in the snow. I’ll get it tomorrow.”

Noting his father's silence, Teddy shuffles to the bathroom, his socks making damp footprints on the floor. Mr. Olssen eyes his son's deliberate walk. The door closes.

Mr. Olssen nods his head at the bathroom and shakes a cigarette from the pack of Marlboros. "The deer fly through the windshield?" He sticks it in his mouth. "Teddy didn't get that face from no tree."

I think of Teddy sitting alone in the hot tub with Joey Sinfone, grinning like a fool. I decide to lie, but I have little practice. "It was a fight. We were at Finn Taylor's house. Some guy wouldn't leave me alone."

"Huh." I watch the cigarette bob on Mr. Olssen's wet lip as he brings the lighter to his face. A flame, an inhale, an exhale. *Tap, tap, tap* on the rim of the ashtray. He doesn't believe me, and I don't blame him.

"I'm sorry again, Mr. Olssen." I wait for a response, and when I get none, I point toward the bathroom. "I'm just gonna say bye to Teddy."

Mr. Olssen pulls the cigarette away, torpid smoke settling into the air, and turns back toward the TV and wash of blue light. Someone guesses five letters, spews words, spews phrases. A cartoonish buzz, no luck, no luck. Halfway down the hall I hear him mutter. "Shame, shame, shame."

*

I press my face against the bathroom door. "Teddy." I hear the sound of water running, the sound of Teddy spitting. More water splashes into the bowl. "Teddy." No answer. I jangle the keys and walk down the hall. His mother's door is closed, but a fine line of light peers out from underneath. Mrs. Olssen is not a good sleeper. She drinks coffee all day, busies herself at night and pecks at small, inconsequential tasks until she finds sleep possible. I've seen her slack-eyed and

slipped at midnight, reading *Reader's Digest* on the couch. She probably heard us come in, probably heard it all. The door to Teddy's bedroom is ajar. I tap it open and enter.

It is dark and cool, and the bed, perfectly made. It is strange to see it in repose, really, to see it at all. Growing up, Teddy was always at my place or we were outside. We only went to his room to store the things we found: marbles, bones, feathers. It feels strange to be in here, the place he will soon collapse and forget, even momentarily, the bruises on his face and the steaming Pontiac resting half dead in the snow.

I search his desk for a scrap piece of paper, a blue pen. I see a tiny bobble-headed turtle like the one on his dashboard. This one is blue and red and still. I've never seen it before and didn't know he had another. I tear out a piece of loose leaf. *Teddy, I'll pay you back.* I slip the note under the turtle and set the car keys on his desk.

*

On my way out, I walk through the kitchen. Mr. Olssen still sits in his golden chair in front the TV cradling a dish of ice cream in his lap. A mustached man snaps and squeezes a bright orange shammy on the screen. Mr. Olssen is dialed in for the night's parade of infomercials. I crane my head toward the living room. "I'm sorry, Mr. Olssen."

He scrapes another spoonful of white into his mouth, unaware. His hearing isn't all that good after all those years of masonry and mining. I make toward the door. I'm crossing the threshold when I hear him clear his throat.

"Don't cover for him, Jess." The spoon rattles into the bowl. "He needs to own up."

When I close the door, I stand on the porch. The bulb burns holes into the cold night air.

*

This is how the night begins: Teddy and I sitting in his taupe Pontiac, heat rasping through the vents and amplifying the smell of sour milk and cheap cologne. Sour milk because the previous

owner spilled a half-gallon in the back seat, cologne because Teddy wants to be going to Finn Taylor's. He knows that I don't; I don't know why he *does*.

"You ever think that smell will go away?" As he drives, I eye the wooden turtle on the dashboard. Its head, like a tiny wooden spoon, sticks out from the shell and quivers with every motion of the car. Colorful and ornate, the turtle is his good luck charm. He picked it for himself at a gas station in Ontonagon when he bought the car.

"I don't mind it that much." Teddy bought the grizzled Pontiac from a Florida snowbird in August. He saved up summer money from work, from scrounging every last bit of birthday card cash from the last four years. John Olssen could have easily patched one together from all the parts sitting in the tall grass of his backyard, but John Olssen wasn't the type of man who gave things away, especially cars. Teddy had to earn it. After we picked it up, he drove down highway 45 with his elbow crooked out the window like a classic fool. Teddy could leave now, could slip into his car and get out whenever he wanted. Sometimes he invited me along on these flights. Sometimes, he did not.

I look out the window. Pines pass and yawn into an infinity of tall, dark bars. Night comes early here in December. We wait for the first snow because snow makes the world brighter, moonlight transforming impenetrable thickets into shadow plays of timber, of deer, of whomever else leaves tracks in the snow. This is what I like best about winter, that it keeps no secrets, that it does not care who or what it shows.

I turn to Teddy. He has on a windbreaker, a sweater with a stripe, and his pool trunks are balled into a plastic bag in the back seat. When Joey Sinfone told him about Finn Taylor's party, he also told Teddy there was a hot tub. I picture all the pale chests of boys my age, lined up like fence posts in the pool, steam condensing on the cold beer cans in their hands. I hear the girls my age, squealing when an underwater hand coils around foot or waist. My stomach roils. These are not our

people. They never were our people. Our people are each other. Teddy is enough for me. I want to be enough for him.

We turn down Portage Lake Road. It's a nice road, a paved road, because Portage Lake is on a chain, and chain-o-lakes people have nice things. A line of cars leads up to a house that looks like a stave church.

Teddy parks delicately. He finds a spot away from other cars, a safe spot for his Pontiac to rest. He places his hand behind my headrest, and when he looks back and turns the wheel, a wave of cologne rolls off of him and into me. Teddy smells like Sunday at St. Albert's Church. Overkill, but I don't tell him.

We are quiet for a moment. I gaze up the driveway. Nothing screams underage drinking like a long line of shit cars clinging to a snowy shoulder of a nice house. "Can we leave by midnight?"

Teddy leans back and grabs his bunched swimsuit from the back seat and opens the door. A rush of cold. "Maybe."

Teddy knows I hate indefinite timelines. He knows I hate not being in control. "Please?"
Teddy smiles and shuts the door. The turtle shakes its head on the dash.

*

Earlier in the evening, I tell my father that Teddy and I are heading to Finn Taylor's party. He is in the kitchen unearthing a cold pork chop from a sheet of plastic wrap. He stops mid-pull, condensation quivering on the transparent pleats. "A party." I have seen this look before: fear, doubt, trust. My father gives me this look when I take night walks across frozen Lake Tilson. *Three inches of ice to walk, he told me. Twelve to drive.*

"Teddy wants to go. Not me."

My father is a game warden and often on scene after kids spin their used sedans into trees and logging trucks. In a town like ours, accidents require all hands on deck, including those of my

father, whose hands are usually in work gloves. He surveys me for a moment, his mind cycling through the images and memories.

“You know you can call me anytime, Jess.”

“I know.” My father has told me this since I was twelve. I could call him, anytime, anywhere, and he would be by, stalling in his black truck, questions saved for the next morning.

“Okay.” He raps his knuckles on the countertop and jostles himself back to the present. My father, to a fault, always leans toward trust. “I’ll be up.” He walks to the living room, plastic clinging to his cold dinner.

*

Finn Taylor’s parents own a construction company. They build vacation homes for snowbirds and real homes for rich Chicago retirees with BMWs and speedboats. Custom stuff: kitchens with granite countertops and living rooms with vaulted ceilings, spiral staircases, windows that wrap all the way around. The houses are always big, always faux log, and always rustic-looking enough to remind passing pontoons that they know what a cabin is but can afford to do better.

Their house is no different. Pointed and windowed and tall, the home’s vaulted roof is at the level of the tree canopy. A light on the second floor spits a kaleidoscope of colors onto the snow of the deck. The house, though not loud, thrums. Like a body, it beats inside.

Teddy bunches his suit in his hands and the plastic bag crinkles. “Wow.”

The front door is flanked by tasteful arrangements of pine boughs, Christmas lights, and juniper berry sprigs. A large metal moose with a red bow around its neck holds a sign. *Welcome*. I think of my deck, which is so littered with birdseed that when the snow melts, millet and sunflower husks cake the planks one inch thick.

“Jesus. Is that a knocker?” I point to the door. A bronze handle affixed with red holly hangs from the middle. “Do you think we have to use it?”

“Probably not.” Teddy smirks. “Can you imagine this on my door?” I picture John Olssen standing on his deck, delicately twiddling screws into a bronze lion with a ring in its mouth. I smile. Teddy turns the knob and we cross the threshold.

Bass thumps and jeers crackle from within. I slip off my boots and throw them into a sea of overturned, wet shoes. Teddy places his neatly against the wall and walks toward the kitchen. For the first time, I follow.

Finn Taylor leans against the glittering, black countertop, shaping a story with his hands to a group of people. Our town is small enough that I know everyone encircling him. I know them, but I do not like them. Finn holds a plastic red cup scrawled with his name.

“Jess fuckin’ Koski? What the hell are you doing here? Didn’t think you did this kinda thing.” Finn sloshes bright orange drink from his cup. His cheeks are pink and his hairline is wet with sweat. I can tell by the way his face stretches like taffy that he is already drunk.

“Sometimes I make exceptions, Finn.”

Finn Taylor isn’t awful, but he isn’t that good, either. He has broad shoulders, golden retriever hair and spends his summer rocketing across Portage Lake on a wave runner. In sixth grade, he told me I had boy legs. That evening, my father helped me, red-faced and sweating in long pants, pick a package of Starburst-colored razors from the supermarket. Last week, Finn asked to copy my study guide. I said no.

“Yo. Ted.” He nods his head at Teddy. Finn’s reaction is delayed, as if he didn’t see him. Then again, most people don’t.

“Donny’s brother bought us a keg. You in?”

Teddy shrugs his shoulders. “Sure.”

“You, Jess?”

“No.” I give Teddy a look. He surveys the expansive kitchen with the island, not wanting to be associated with my no’s and gritted jaw.

“No fun, Koski.”

“You already know this.” I look around the smattering of his friends. “Where’s Joey?”

Finn nods his head upstairs. “Him and some others are in the hot tub on the outside deck. We’re waiting for it to warm up.”

Teddy taps my shoulder. “I’m gonna go change.” He runs upstairs. No, he bounds upstairs. His excitement is palpable and I resent him for this.

Finn’s friends meander upstairs. They’re not interested in me, probably wondering why I am here at all. I wander over to the big bay windows in the living room and survey Portage Lake. Big houses line the frozen shore, laced with lights. The view is regal. Every night, this is what the Taylor family sees.

Finn comes up from behind me, the scent of alcohol on his breath. “We’re gonna go ride on the lake later. You in for that?”

I scrunch my face up. “It hasn’t been cold enough to drive.” It’s only mid-December, and the ice isn’t good until January. My father has recounted numerous stories to me of thin ice and dumb, impatient fishermen. *Three to walk, twelve to drive.* “Have you checked the ice?”

Finn takes another slug of radioactive orange liquid in his cup. His cheeks glow. “It’s fine. I grew up on this lake.” He nods out the window at the frozen water. Portage Lake is very different than Lake Tilson, but for a moment, I understand Finn Taylor. “I know it well.”

*

Joey Sinfone works summers with us at the Dari Maid. Like me, he runs cross-country. Unlike me, he is quick and stringy. In the hot tub, his ribs bulge from his chest like a greyhound’s.

“Surprised you came, Jess.” The water around him burbles. I stand next to the tub in my jacket, socked feet sticking to an icy mat. Teddy sits at the opposite end, floating his arms like noodles. He has had three of Finn’s magic orange drinks and grins far too much. Teddy turns smiley and adventurous when he is drunk.

I dip a finger in. The water is pleasantly hot and I regret not bringing a swimsuit. Around me, steam curls into the air. “Teddy forced me to come.”

Joey turns to Teddy. “Good job.” He smiles. Joey has an easy smile. He gets the most tips at Dari-Maid, mostly from middle-aged moms wanting to silence their children with fried cheese curds and hot fudge sundaes. Joey tells me I scowl. Perhaps this is why Teddy likes him more, why he wanted to come to a cliché teenage party in a rich house on a nice lake. Joey doesn’t know Teddy like I do, though. He never will. I tell myself this. I want to believe it.

Teddy splashes me with water. “It wasn’t easy. But I guilted her into it.”

“Sure, Teddy.” I walk over the deck railing, out of splashing range. From here, I see the driveway. Headlights glittering, more cars zip down the road. Friends get out, hands shoved into pockets. I don’t recognize any of them; they must be from surrounding towns or friends from Finn’s hockey league. Whoever they are, they’re parking in Teddy’s Pontiac. I turn back to Joey and Teddy, who are laughing. I hope, not about me. “Why is nobody else up here?”

As if on cue, a primal hooting vibrates from inside the house. Joey nods toward the sliding door. “Oh, I think they’re coming.”

Finn’s body presses against the glass, metal keg perched on his shoulder, hair slicked with sweat. He is shirtless and bellowing. “Open it, Koski!” His arms tremble. A parade of people cheer from behind his back.

I open the door and let the mob through. Finn stumbles in and drops what looks like an oil drum on the deck.

“Ready, Olssen? You’re the first.” He holds out the thin black tap. “Grab the keg handles and we’ll lift you up, yeah?”

“What?” I whip my head towards Teddy. “Ready for what?” Smiley and rosy checked, he ignores me. He steps one tentative foot outside the hot tub and onto the mat. He grips the side, trying to maintain his balance despite the ice and all the booze.

Teddy walks toward Finn, who beats the keg like a conga drum. “C’mon, Ted!” His body is slick and steaming, and I wonder if he can feel the cold. I wonder if he is drunk enough to not care.

Joey gets out of the tub and hovers at Teddy’s shoulder. He nods at the snakelike tube. “We’re gonna lift you up. Put the tap in your mouth and drink as much as you can, okay?”

Finn and Joey grab Teddy’s wet thighs and lift him to a headstand. Teddy’s arms bend and tremble. “You got it, Ted?” He nods, his wet hands gripping the cold metal.

The crowd chants. “One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi.” I watch Teddy chug, beer spitting from his distended cheeks. His face reddens. Teddy does not look like Teddy, and I look away. Lights at the neighbor’s house go on. I know they can see us. I know they can hear us. A circus of high school kids on a balcony with a keg, and Teddy is one of them.

“Oh shit, oh shit!”

I turn around just in time to see Finn lose his grip on Teddy’s wet legs. He sways into Joey, who too loses his grip. With awful sounding scrape, Teddy smashes face-first into the metal keg. His body falls backward on the deck and smacks against the railing.

“Teddy!”

Finn crouches down and covers his mouth. He clearly can’t do anything but stare. “Ted, you all right?”

Teddy rolls over. Blood gushes out his nose, down his chin, along the valley of bones in his chest. The blood dilutes in the hot tub sweat, turning him pink. I push past Finn’s friends. Joey

stands there like he's never seen blood. "Joey, go get a towel or something!" He nods and runs away, like he's good at.

I crouch over Teddy. His breath smells sour and liquored. There's a gash on the back of his head and his cheekbone is turning plum.

"Teddy, your nose." I bring my hand to his face and cup the blood. Joey comes back with a wet, disintegrating wad of toilet paper and offers it to us. "Come on, sit up." I help him lean against the railing and hold the wet mass to his face. Soon, it is sodden with red.

I think of the house lights flashing on. Of all the beer, of all the blood. "Teddy, we should leave. It might be broken."

His body trembles in the cold. He is bare and wet in twenty degree cold. "I'm fine, Jess. Jesus." He staggers up and raises a victory fist. The crowd claps, and from somewhere behind us, Finn bellows. "Trooooooper!"

"Come on, Teddy. Don't be dumb." I look at his head. The gash is small, but that's not what I'm worried about.

"You wanna be here when the cops come? Looking and smelling like this?" It was only a matter of time before the retired couple watching TV next door called the station. I drag him toward the sliding door, weaving through the strange faces. Blood spatters the expensive carpeting of Finn Taylor's house, red like the holly on his door.

"What about Joey?" He looks out toward the hot tub.

"Joey's fine." I think of Joey standing there like a statue, useless. Joey shouldn't have gotten out of the tub to help him. Joey is just as bad as Finn.

"Come on. Clean up. My dad can take a look at your nose and you can stay over at my place." Teddy weaves into the bathroom. He holds onto whatever he can: door frames, end tables, a

coat rack. While he is in the bathroom, I find his clothes balled up in the plastic bag. I fish the keys from his pocket and place them in mine. When I near the door, I hear retching.

“Teddy, your clothes are outside when you’re ready.” I place the plastic bag on the floor and return to the foyer to grab his coat and boots. As I pick through the wet heap of shoes, Finn skids down the foyer, fully and properly clothed. He almost looks sober. “How’s Ted?” He almost looks worried.

“Alive.” I think of Teddy in the bathroom, trying to get his arms through the right holes in his shirt, blood dropping onto the tile floor.

Finn looks relieved. “Good. I’m so sorry I lost my grip there.” He rubs his hands together and looks at what I’m carrying. “You leaving?”

“Yes.”

“You two aren’t interested in a ride around the lake?”

I walk toward the bathroom and drop the boots. I have bloodstains on my shirt and Teddy is making a murder scene of the bathroom. “What do you think?” This was the thing about Finn: he was oblivious. He thought everything and everyone was bulletproof.

“Okay, okay.” Finn pauses. His flushed cheeks make him look so young. It’s disarming to see his bluster undercut by such a simple thing as a red face. He nods and walks toward the front door. “I’m gonna go start the car.” I’m almost sad to see him go.

When Teddy exits the bathroom, he wipes his sleeve along his mouth. He is pale and still shaking. I offer him his coat. “I’ll drive. Don’t worry.” He tips as he tries to sink a foot into his shoe and braces himself against the wall. I cannot tell if he is concussed or drunk. When I put my hand on his back, he shoos me away. “Stop.”

The walk to the door is precarious. Teddy shuffles like a sick boy and I kick away shoes and clear the path. Once outside, Teddy straightens and seems to sober up in the face of the cold. When

we reach the driveway, I see Finn maneuver his black Jeep down the gentle incline of his backyard toward the lake. A group of friends huddle around a makeshift bonfire and cheer him on. He honks and flashes his brights. Playing to the crowd, Finn Taylor creeps slowly toward Portage Lake.

*

The front lawn looks like Mr. Olssen's scrap yard. There are cars everywhere. The early arrivals parked neatly in lines along the driveway. The fashionably late hockey friends parked wherever they could: the road, the yard, snow. Someone gunned a truck over a snow bank in what was undoubtedly a statement of masculinity. The Pontiac, an early arrival, stood no chance. When we reach the car, it is clear we are parked in.

Once inside, I start the car. I put my hand behind Teddy's headrest and begin to back up. Inch, turn. Inch, turn. Inch, turn. Teddy closes his eyes and moans.

"Don't you dare puke on me."

"Don't you nick my car."

I pull the car forward again and then throw it back into reverse. "This is your fault."

"Just shut up, Jess." Teddy slouches deeper and rests his head against the seatbelt. "Please."

I back up again and steal a glance at his hair. I cannot tell if his brown hair is dark with water or blood.

Finally, we reach the end of the driveway and I pull onto the road. I fiddle with the dials, looking for heat until cold air hisses from the grates. Teddy knocks my hand midair. "You got it wrong." He switches another dial. The air is still cold. I make sure I do a full stop at the intersection, that my lights are on, that I flick the blinker when I turn.

I attempt an act of generosity. "You can sleep at my place. My dad won't care." Teddy doesn't say anything. A bruise inks across his face: the flat plane of his cheek, the hollow under his left eye. His freckles are crusted with dried blood. He is a pulped mess.

Sick of generosity, I ask him what I really want to know. “Teddy. Why did you do that?” He remains silent, clutching the seatbelt. I know I shouldn’t be grilling him now but I can’t help myself. “Huh?” I press on the accelerator and gain speed.

“Maybe I wanted to, okay?”

“Since when? You were never interested in partying before.”

Red and blue lights flicker on. A cop car pulls out from a lake road a mile ahead and barrels toward us. Then it begins: the wail and keen of a siren.

“Oh, God no.” I rehash my actions. Stopped, blinkered right, turned off brights. I check my speed. Five above. Teddy reawakens and straightens in his seat.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing!” I slow and pull to the shoulder. Teddy takes a sleeved fist and tries to clean the dried blood from under his nose. He rubs vigorously, licks his fingers and tries again. My stomach hollows, feels like someone took a ladle and carved it all out. Whoever is in that car knows my father. Whoever is in that car will see Teddy. Will smell the booze in the car.

But the cruiser does not slow. It zips past us, speeding in the direction from which we came.

I pull back onto the road and regain my speed. I turn to Teddy to say close call, near miss, lucky, lucky, lucky. These are my mistakes: my optimism, my sideways glance.

And then, it happens in this order: eyes like orbs, a body leaping through space, too slow, too late, too near. And I swerve, I brake, I clench and prepare for blackness. We sail through white and there I see it, I see it coming slow, a tall black tree. Compress, crunch, fling forward, pitch back.

We stop. My body thrums like a live wire. I feel my skin lifting up, rising with my body’s spark, my heart’s electricity. I am staring at webbed windshield, at a tree, at smoke. There is a deep yellow scar in this tree, and a chunk of wood sits on the hood.

“Oh God. You okay. You okay?” I pat his shoulders. He nods. Slow eyes, slow hands coming to rub collarbone, his chest, the place where the belt restrained his lunging guts. The windshield looks like shattered puddle ice. “Oh God, I’m sorry. The deer.” I throw open the door, colliding with rangy saplings and scrub. The snow is up to my shins. I look at the front of the car.

The hood is arched up like a crooked spine, the wheel is warped and the light smashed in. The front parts have come undone, all of them, and slouch away in an act of continental drift. Smoke rises from engine to canopy. The deer, there is no deer. There is nothing but this car.

A deep panic settles in. *I crashed the car. I crashed the car. I crashed Teddy’s car.* He opens the door and plants his boots into the snow. I cover my face with my hands and wait for him to react. He steadies himself on the door and looks.

I do not wait for his face to crumple. “I’ll see if it starts.” I slip my body back into the dead silence of the Pontiac and turn the keys. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. I take the keys out and stab them back into the ignition. My turns yield nothing. Absolutely nothing. I duck back out of the car.

Teddy’s bare hands clench and unclench, turning rose-red in the cold. “You coulda just hit the damn thing, Jess! That’s rule number one!” He yells this. It is a yell that unbraids the longer it is held. “Where is it? Where is the damn deer?” He whips around wildly, looking for the body, the blood. “Was there even a deer?”

“I promise I’ll pay you back. Teddy, I promise. I promise.” My hands shake and I am boring, boring, boring the key to his car into my palm. Hoping to mar, to puncture, to draw blood. My face is wet with tears because I am unused to making mistakes. I am unused to ruining someone else’s life. I am unused to being at Teddy’s mercy so far in the wrong. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I’m gonna get reamed.”

“Teddy, I’ll tell your dad—“

“You don't fucking know.” He careens off into the snow, toward the road, arms pumping to maintain his balance.

“Teddy, you can't just go!” I lurch after him. He is drunk and reeling in the snow.

I think of John Olssen, telling his Teddy to sit up straight, speak loudly, and shoot a deer. These were things John Olssen wanted from his sons, but he never got it from his youngest. He never would.

*

Teddy stops twice to throw up. The first time, I run to help, but he lashes out a hand and pushes me away. “No.” The second time, I stand back and watch. Big, loud, painful heaves throw him forward to his knees. For five minutes, I watch him pitch his empty gut into the snow. *Watch*, I tell myself. My own stomach roils, but this is what I get, this is what I get for veering his car into a tree. *Watch*. The taste of beer stales and circulates in the back of my throat.

Teddy gets up and the pile steams. He smears an arm across his mouth and staggers forward, feet punching holes in the drifts on his way back to the road.

I call from behind. “Teddy. You okay?” He is silent, hunched over, moving forward down the long, white road. The pines murmur and agitate in a cold night wind. “Teddy.” His boots crunch the compact road snow, making wavy, grooved prints. Teddy is easy to see, easy to trace in a northwoods winter. I place my feet on the ghosts of his crooked footsteps and follow. Winter is not for hiding.

*

When we reach Teddy's house, the porch light is on. In August, moths ram their pillowed bodies against the bare bulb, singeing breast and wing. Now it is alone, blazing, throwing golden light on the bag of rock salt slouched against the siding. I look to the living room window. Light shifts and shuffles across the pane. Someone is awake.

I run up to Teddy and grab the back of his arm. "I'm coming in with you."

He jerks his arm away, nearly losing his balance. "Go away." He continues to plough forward, head down, toward the porch, toward the light. *Please, just look at me.*

I grab a fistful of jacket and yank. The fabric is rough and thin, not a full winter coat, not an ice-fishing coat. Underneath, a stretched-out sweater and a thin, ribby chest pushing, pulling blood. I tug until he turns around. "I'm not going away. Your dad is in there." Teddy swings around.

His bare hands collide with my shoulders. "Jess." This time the shove is weak and off target. Frozen vomit clings to the stiff pleats of Teddy's coat sleeve. Even in the cold, I smell the vodka on his breath. I smell his father's cologne. My grip on his jacket tightens.

"Get off me!" Teddy twists again and his hood falls back, revealing his face: pink and raw, razed by wind and tears. For a moment, his heat meets mine. Our breath pools, condenses, and lifts between us, spiraling up towards the moon.

"I gotta tell him what happened. "

Teddy pants, his face is pointed down at his frozen shoelaces. "No you don't." He takes a crusted sleeve and wipes it under his nose. He leans eastward, and then westward. My hand clings to him like a grapple hook.

"You want him to see you like this?"

Teddy snorts and wipes his nose again. I know he is thinking of Monday nights, when his father barrels through the screen door like a bear and grabs the corners of everything—tables, chairs, counters, Teddy— to steady his stagger to the couch. He is thinking of summer, when Mr. Olssen sits on the back porch, eyeing his cars and crushing cans like mosquitoes. Teddy is thinking, knowing, that his stumbling makes not a damn difference in the world.

I look toward the window again. It glows. It looks nothing like the kaleidoscope of color dappling the snow of Finn's house. "He needs to know it was me. I need to tell him."

Teddy gives one final wrench, and I let him go. He climbs the stairs. The cuffs of his jeans are stiff with snow. "I don't need you."

I watch him walk up the steps, hand on railing. The bulb on the porch burns like a lidless eye. I follow.

*

My night ends with me alone in my kitchen, wrung loose and bent over the sink. My father is not home. He left, but I don't know why. I can guess. I won't know until tomorrow that Finn Taylor cracked through the thin ice of Portage Lake.

I look out at Lake Tilson, at our swampy, carpy cove. Frozen over and slicked with ice, the lake looks clean and smooth, hiding rotting logs and rusted, lost hooks. This is the other thing about winter, it erases. And through its erasure, it lies.

Somewhere, the ice cracks. Another fissure jags across the lake's crust. Somewhere my father walks on, holding his breath, counting the inches.

CITIZEN SCIENCE

It was before dawn, and the mist slunk low between the oaks like a sluggish, ghostly banner. Jess stood on top of the hill and traced the places where the fog ebbed and flowed between the trees. She could see the nets, but the birds could not.

The toes of her shoes were damp; old browned burs, tenacious and washed-in, clung to the cuffs of her shirt. As she walked down the hill, she worried the hem of the sleeves with her fingers. This was her father's shirt: elbows softened, paint stained, and buttons loose like baby teeth. It was too big on her, and she let it hang like a peeling husk. Her father had bound the shirt up tight, second button to the neck, where it belted in the giant galumphing of his chest. Jess picked at a tough little seed burrowed in the cuff. She pried away a shard and flicked it onto the wet grass.

Her father had died a year ago today on a morning like this. Out for a walk, his heart had seized and then stuttered and then sometime during sunrise, it had stopped. A jogger found him and used his own fingers to clean her father's mouth of the granola bar he had been eating. He had pumped his chest, he had pushed his own hot breath into her father's lungs. The jogger's efforts were wasted. Jess was all alone at thirty-two.

She imagined her father's lips, blue and flecked with crumbs. His eyes skyward, taking in a crown of red pine boughs. Jess bunched the loose sleeves of the shirt into her clammy hands and squeezed. A human heart is this size, the size of a closed fist. Along wood's edge, a net agitated in the wind.

Down the hill, a couple of women younger than Jess unfurled a new mist net strung up between two poles. Jess walked down to help them. They had baseball hats and ponytails, their eyes tight with sleep. The girls pawed at the net, unrolling a dark mess of fine strings with their soft fingers.

Jess touched the net. It was nothing like the thick, bright green fishing net she and her father had used to basket pike on Little Rice Lake. This one was gossamer, meant to catch things that fly rather than swim.

One of the girls turned to Jess. She had dark freckles, plain eyes. Her voice cracked, first words since rising at five in the morning. “Wanna help?” The net was rolled into a long, scroll. She pecked at the netting, pulling it downward until it unwound into a full sheet.

Jess watched her work. Pinch, pull, pinch, pull, pinch, pull. Her manner was brusque, impersonal. Pinch, pull. Pinch, pull. The dark wad uncoiled. Windows unfolded and gaped like tiny mouths. It looked intricate, all those fine strings with the potential to bunch, tear, or knot. Jess shook her head. She didn’t want to further its tangle. “I’m afraid I’ll make it worse.”

The freckled girl continued to peck and yank. Jess backed away, left her to the dainty, mindless work. She walked back up the hill, toward a band of people in hiking boots and long pants. They paced in the predawn, checked the nets, primed themselves for the first catch. As she climbed, Jess’s lungs strained against the sodden, thick air. She looked to the east. The sky was turning butcher pink.

*

They called it citizen science. Average people went out into the world and collected data on coyotes, on mitten crabs, on flyspecks of interstellar dust. Some citizens were trained, some not; some accompanied by real scientists with degrees and experience, some not. Citizen science allowed every person to play a small part in making sense of the world. *Making sense of the world.* That was what the volunteer coordinator had said when she leaned into Jess with an informational brochure. *Be part of something bigger! Do science!* She had dragonfly earrings that swung wildly off her earlobes when she explained how their citizen science group banded birds with little metal cuffs to track and

learn more about their movements. *Hold a chickadee in your hand! Come along sometime!* The volunteer coordinator had the resilient sort of pep embraced by border collies and Mormon missionaries.

But Jess was not interested in making sense of the world. She went because Millie told her to. They had been sitting on her back porch two weeks ago, drinking tea and listening to the loons keened over the lake. She had been anticipating the anniversary of his death, at a loss for what to do. So, like she always did, she asked Millie. Millie was seventy-five, her mother, in a way, and still shoveled all the snow off her long gravel drive.

Jess crushed the tea bag with her spoon, wordless. She ground her spoon in again. The bag split.

“Do something he would like,” Millie had said. Her fingers were knobbly and thick like ginger root. Jess grew up hanging off Millie’s pier, watching boathouse spiders underneath the dock. When she had caught Jess pushing one into the water, Millie yanked her up by her t-shirt, pushed her over the property line with a copy of *Charlotte’s Web* and said “Don’t you come back here till you have something good to say.” Millie held Jess for three days straight after the hospital called. Jess could not look into Millie’s face without predicting loss.

Jess had stared into her tea. “Okay.” Her father had worked for the Department of Natural Resources and managed fish populations in the state. He had a great reverence for nature, for science, for using the latter to protect the former. Jess imagined holding a soft, warm bird in her hand, the pulse of her thumb beating along its own. “Okay.”

Millie took a sip and nodded at Jess. “Come on honey, finish that.” The bag lay gutted at the bottom of the mug, its contents spilling out. Jess watched the leaves gyre and gyre in the thin yellow water. The sound of a loon, like another ghost, lifted into the air.

*

“Bird!”

The word echoed up the hill, along the woods, floating from person to person like a chain until it reached the scientist, seated on a stump, who had just begun to unscrew the top of his battered thermos. He perked a little, set his coffee down, and placed his hands on his thighs. He looked Jess's age and wore an olive green fisherman's cap. The strings dangled beneath his chin, cinched by a wooden bead. Jess looked down toward the mist net the freckled girl had pecked and pulled. A bird body darkened the mesh.

The instructor pushed himself up and rubbed his hands together. "All right, all right crew. Here we go." He grabbed two guidebooks and a pliers, turned to Jess and pointed to a silver tackle box near her feet. "Would you be so kind to bring that along with us?" Jess picked it up. The tackle box had surprising weight, and its metal contents shifted and slid when she readjusted her grip on the handle. "That's the jewelry," the instructor said. "The bird bands." He nodded his head at Jess. "Thank you."

The instructor smiled but was unable to hold her gaze. Jess had noticed this when she had first helped him in the predawn light, collecting the collapsed nets from the bed of his truck. His small blue eyes flitted and alighted upon her own; flitted and alighted, flitted and alighted like cabbage moths in Millie's vegetable garden. He wiped his mouth after each time he smiled, as if to say *well, that was fine but we are done with that*. Sometimes the smile remained. That was what she liked best about the scientist: that his hand hadn't been strong enough to brush his lingering amusement away.

The instructor waved to the crowd of citizen scientists. "Come on, everybody." Jess followed him and ten others down the hill. As she walked, she listened: to the hush of their shoes, to their breathing, to the sound of birds, birds, birds, spiraling above.

The bird hung upside down in the net, entangled in a mess of thread. Jess recognized the orange breast. She saw her father, throwing these birds wrinkled raisins in the snow. *They're such good listeners Jess*, he had said in his quiet voice, tapping his ear. *They hear the worms beneath our feet.*

The instructor stood before the captured bird and placed his guides and pliers on the grass. He looked at his citizen scientists. "What bird is this?"

Jess stood behind him, her voice barely above a whisper. "American robin."

"Good." The instructor smiled. Jess placed the tackle box on the ground. "What order?"

"Passeriformes." The freckled girl answered. She stood directly across the net from the bird. This time, her voice didn't crack.

The instructor pointed at her. "Excellent." She beamed.

"Okay, good." The instructor approached the mist net and wrapped his hand around the warm body of the robin, beginning to disentangle it from the net. "You have to be careful when you hold them," he said. "Sometimes their hearts give out." His fingers pulled the bird through loops and propped open spaces and untwisted netting. Feathers began to slough off. The instructor tugged a string, and the American robin screamed.

Jess blanched. The sound was shrill, dissonant, unavian. She had heard this sound before but never from a bird. The instructor readjusted his grip, and the bird screamed again. This time, it didn't stop. Scream, scream, scream. "Oh shush." The instructor pulled the head of the bird through the net. The bead beneath his chin trembled with exertion.

The citizen scientists were still. They stood in a ring and stared at the crying bird. Feathers the color of storm clouds flaked off in sheaves. No one whispered or coughed. No one readjusted hat or bag. From within the instructor's hot fist, the robin cried and shed more feathers. The birds that had chipped and warbled in their orbits above were now shuttered and silent.

“Oh no. What have we got here.” The instructor stopped pulling the dark floss of the mist netting from the bird’s head. He looked into the yellow of its mouth. Then quietly, to himself. “Oh no.” His quick hands stilled.

The robin surveyed the ring of quiet watchers, black eyes wheeling from face to face to face. It screamed again.

The instructor wiped the sweat collecting in the gullies beneath his eyes. “Birds have forked tongues,” he said. He wheedled the thread away from the head and pulled. The tongue followed, taut as a tightrope. “And his got caught.” The citizen scientists leaned in, entranced, their hot exhales pressing in on the bird.

Jess looked down, away, at the sodden spots on the nose of her hiking boots. Her own tongue felt like a slug in her mouth. She grated the inside of her lip against her teeth until she could taste blood. The volunteer coordinator had been wrong, all wrong.

The instructor tugged the line again, drawing the tongue out like taffy. “It’s caught good.” The ring of citizen scientists nodded and observed the bird squeal. The freckled girl craned her neck to see. *The air is so still*, Jess thought, watching the feathers fall down toward her feet. *So still*.

The instructor tried to extricate flesh from net. He drew the robin up and then down, tugging the tongue from the gaping, golden maw. He grunted. The bird cried. “This usually happens to wood peckers,” he muttered. He brought the fisted bird up to nose level. “You shoulda kept your damn mouth closed.” Tongue out like a plank, as if the instructor were a doctor who had asked the bird to open up and say *abbb*. He wasn’t a doctor, but this was science.

The robin reminded Jess of when her father had worked a hook loose from the gullet of a bluegill. How he wormed the hook back and forth, stretching and breaking the corners of the fish’s mouth to free it. When he finally did, the fish flapped and floated around the shallows tipping lily pads until it died. *Damn it*, her father had said, wiping his bloody thumb on his blue jeans. Jess stayed

quiet in these moments, fixed her eyes on the far off trees, closed her ears to the splashing of the mutilated fish. *Damn it.*

The instructor turned to Jess. “Check the box for my pocket knife.” She looked up from the ground, from the feathers, to his damp face. His eyes stuck this time. “I need it for the bird.”

Jess hesitated, eyes flicked to the bird’s tongue. This was science. This was surgery. She knelt down and unlatched the silver tackle box. Inside, cells and cells of metal cuffs. Stamped with numbers, dashes, letters. Small as seeds, big as quarters. Glittering shackles for bird legs.

Jess felt the scientist’s eyes boring through her father’s shirt into her spine. “There,” he said, seeing something she didn’t. She flipped over maps, tape, wrench, twine. The robin cried. Jess’s eyes kept flicking to the cells of bird bands. All those numbered rings. Inhale. *This is surgery, surgery, surgery.*

“Right there.” Once again, the instructor pointed with his voice. The bird cried. “Shut up.”

Jess wanted to punch the tackle box, let it go flying, bands disappearing in the grass. She flipped more papers and rags.

Then she found it: the knife, thick and red, beneath a rag.

With her thumbnail, she pried instruments up. A bottle opener. A file. A blade. *Not this. Not this. Not this.* She unfurled the tiny scissors and stood, held it to the scientist’s face.

The instructor maneuvered to let her stand by him and the bird. “Come right here.” Jess neared. Bird’s eye, black like a raisin, outlined by white, rolling, witnessing her.

The instructor wagged his pinky finger. “Cut here and here.” He pointed to knots in the mist net, knots close to the bird’s own tongue. The Swiss army knife was hot in her hand. The bird screeched. She knew this sound, knew it very well. Jess brought the mouth of the scissors to the bird’s beak.

Snip. A piece of net fell. The instructor pulled the line, the line pulled the tongue. He was pulling it tight, too tight, so tight the tongue could uproot. “Now, here.”

Jess moved the forked blade toward the robin's forked tongue. Tongue, line, tongue, line, tongue, line. *Snip.*

Jess cut the line. The robin's tongue, still encircled by string, was free.

The instructor began quickly to remove the robin from the way in which it flew into the mist net. The body came easy.

Jess sheathed the scissors and backed away. With the freed bird in one fist, the instructor kneeled down and picked through the tackle box. "I'll be damned if I don't band you after all this." He fished a shiny band out. "Somebody grab the pliers." Jess melted back. An older man stepped forward and helped clamp the ring on the robin's leg.

"Done." The robin's ankle was belted in stamped aluminum. The instructor held the bird to the sky and opened his fist. The American robin shot into the air, toward the woods where somewhere, deeper, stretched between two oaks, another mist net stood. A mat of moist feathers darkened the ground between the scientist's boots. He peeled the wet down from his hands.

"Bird. Another bird!" A high, excited voice called. Jess looked along the length of their net. She saw birds, more birds, entangled and dangling upside down. A junco, a chickadee, a tiny little house wren. The freckled girl ran, ponytail swinging, and wrapped a hand around the slate-colored junco as if to say *mine, this one is mine*. She looked to the instructor, who was cleaning the feathers from his jeans. "Can I give this one a try?"

The scientist took off his hat and ran a hand through his curly, thick hair. A smile. "Hopefully." He latched the tackle box, picked it up, and met her. The group of citizen scientists followed. Jess did not.

Her father had taught her how to clean a fish when she was twelve. He was in the shed, hands glittering in fish scales. On the floor stood a five-gallon bucket, fish slapping in the warm, anoxic water, silently heaving. He hooked his finger in gills, and the gills unfurled like a Chinese fan,

raw and pink. He placed the fish on newsprint, slick with gut and slime. Its gills still dilated. Her father had taken a big rock and brought it down on its head. The tail flipped weakly. He brought it down again. And again.

Her father had held a big filet knife in his hands. Hands that threw raisins to robins and cupped fat toads. Hands that cooked her dinner, hands that had raised her all alone.

Here. I'll show you how to clean a fish. His hands had sparkled with scales. And Jess took the knife, lined it along the pale belly of the pike, and made her cut.

*

Jess turned from the citizen scientists and walked up the hill. She slipped off her father's shirt and dropped the scientist's red knife into her pocket. The birds made such beautiful sounds overhead.

MOON LAKE

The lake looks more like a sickle than a moon. Or so Jess thinks as she tugs her dead father's little red sled across the frozen water. Something sharp and skinny, something to separate the living from the dead. Her father always thought otherwise: the lake was luminous, quiet, curved like the runners of a well-worn rocking chair. He had fished Moon Lake as a boy and caught bluegill the size of dinner plates. Jess imagines her father trekking onto the lake as a child, huddling over a hole in his father's oversized stocking cap. Now she is the one alone on the thin lake, pulling a sled across a forgotten sheet of ice in the heart of the Ottawa National Forest. Her footsteps are too loud and the only ones on the lake. The sled hushes along, the snow whispering secrets beneath its weight.

This is what Jess carries: a pickle bucket, a thermos, two tip-ups with orange flags. On the sled: a minnow bucket, a book, an ice auger with a corkscrew blade. Her pocket: a depth finder, an acorn, tissues balled in a plastic bag. Jess knows the ice is thick, her blade is sharp, and the temperature is dropping. She also knows that the last person who touched these items is no longer here. She pulls up her scarf and braces against the steady wind.

Jess finds the spot and drops her gear. As a child, she loved ice fishing. Padded in a full-body snowsuit that zipped up the back, she was invincible. She tore across the lake, hunted wolf tracks, and burnt her tongue sipping too soon at the hot chocolate her father kept in his green thermos. When he fished, she spread out, belly to lake, and eyed the bubbles trapped in the ice. In her bones, she felt the great lake groan and crack. In winter, Jess thought, is when the lake came alive.

As an adult, it is different. Not many women fish, let alone on the ice. When Jess goes, men walk onto the lake all around her and she does not gallop or wave or talk. In the distance, she watches them throw snowballs to their dogs, fiddle the dials on their radios, and crack open cans of beer. She resents herself for not waving, for not looking up. She wants to be the gregarious, warm

person her father was. For men, waving is an acknowledgement. For women, Jess learned, it is an invitation.

There are other things Jess wishes she had: better knees, a dog, her father's ability to deescalate a tense situation. Alone, she is both shy and abrasive. But with Teddy, her best friend, she could be tough and mouthy. But she no longer has Teddy to back her up. This is what she misses about him. His presence could make her become more than herself, make her joke with strangers and toss her hair. Teddy got tired of being her anchor. Jess did not blame him.

At the spot, Jess cleans the snow off the ice with the toe of her boot. She reveals dark water and imagines the fish suspended in the dense liquid, sluggish and circling like a children's mobile. She lifts her father's ice auger from the sled and positions the blade above the exposed ice. Steadying the auger with her left hand, she rapidly turns the handle with her right.

You must be strong to do this. You must be strong. Jess huffs and pushes her weight into the upright blade. The metal cuts through inches and inches of ice. Shavings curl and pile on the lake. Her right arm burns. Her shoulder feels like it is peeling off. The pain reminds her of karate, of punches she gave and took many years ago. She remembers this, and grinds harder.

The ice auger carves into liquid lake, and water sloshes from the cut. Jess skims out the ice and stares at her creation. A black hole.

She sits on the pickle bucket, takes off her gloves and prepares a tip-up. Jess unwinds the line and plucks a minnow from the bucket. It is smooth and grey and already she regrets what she is about to do.

Suddenly, a snowmobile with cardinal stripes rockets down the access to the lake. Upon seeing Jess, the machine stops. The figure has dark goggles and broad shoulders. *Some drunk guy looking for a lake to rip around on.* She does not look up, does not want to see if he waves. The motor

growls and idles as Jess warms the minnow in her hands. When she hears him gun the machine back through the trees, she breathes.

In winter, a frozen lake is like a savannah: empty, flat, barren. Jess can see everything, and everything can see her. She hooks the minnow and lowers it into the lightless lake.

*

The year before college, Jess's father had broached the uncomfortable topic that was her body. Jess was sitting at the countertop, warming a bowl of alphabet soup in the microwave. She placed an unfolded napkin atop the bowl like her father had taught her. Through the darkened window, she watched it rotate, the corners of the paper veil lifting under strange winds. Her father drifted into the room like a ghost and watched the bowl spin before her. The microwave hummed.

"You ever think about karate?"

Jess turned toward him. At first, she did not think her father was speaking to her. She had never had fully grown used to the way he floated in and addressed his daughter by addressing the room. But there was nobody else to hear but her: the mother was dead, the dog was deaf, and the best friend was down the road. It was always just him and her. Jess's father placed his hand on his chest, palm orbiting his heart. He did this when he wanted to summon words.

"Not really." The soup popped. Tomatoes always popped. Why only tomatoes?

"Well, I see they're offering a community self defense class at the VFW."

"I don't think I'd like it."

"It would be useful." Her father then patted his chest, *tap-tap*, hand outstretched like an eagle's wing. He did this to emphasize his words, to show that he was not suggesting but rather, advising.

The soup popped again and the napkin drooped. Jess did not like the idea of community karate. Anybody could show up, including nobody. It would be her alone in a banquet hall, smoldering with embarrassment. “Are you going to do it with me?”

“No.” Her father’s lips twitched. “But it would be good to know before you go off to college.” He rapped his knuckles on the counter to finish the matter. “I’ll pay for you and Teddy.”

Jess sunk deeper into her elbows. Now she would have to convince Teddy, who hated public displays of bodily ability more than she. Another lick of broth popped. Her father remained standing there, collecting his thoughts. When he was sure he had no more words, Jess’s father turned and drifted back from where he came, hand massaging his heart.

Jess wondered what her father had seen. He had gone to college for a natural resources degree with a bunch of men who used cases of beer as desk chairs. She wondered what made him so scared, what persuaded him to seek protection for a daughter he knew was tough as black spruce.

The microwave beeped. Jess punched the button to release her soup and pinched the lip of the hot bowl. The napkin slouched like a deflated circus tent into her soup. *Damn*. It was soggy and spattered with licks of red. As she waited for it to cool, she peered into the soup for a message, a fortune from the universe. All Jess saw was a smattering of limp noodles half submerged in salty, processed brine. She used to love this soup, used to spell out messages for her father to read, but now it was inscrutable, all of it.

*

Jess watches the wind. It twists and whips, gathers dry snow and then expels the remains across the lake. It could be alive, she thinks. *Why couldn't it be?* The way it moves, the way it helixes and stops for a moment, as if admiring its silhouette in a department store mirror. Jess hunkers into her coat and jigs a rod above the hole. The flag of her tip-up cracks in the wind.

Karate. This was how her father addressed concerns. He suggested practical actions. Things one could research, things one could do. Jess appreciated this about her father: he encouraged her always to act. It grounded her in the world and not in her head. Only years later, grappling with the toilet, vomiting in grief over his death, did she learn that only practical problems had practical solutions. Never mind about the problems that had no solutions at all.

Jess feels her throat restrict. She sucks in a mouthful of air and tries to empty her mind, tries to picture the cold air seeping around the corners of her tight, dark lungs. *Breathe, breathe, breathe.* Her breath shudders and rasps in her throat. *The air laps like a wave in my lungs. The air laps like a wave in my lungs.* The therapist had told her to think of blue, to think of water. Jess knows a lot of water, some of it good, some of it bad.

Her throat loosens; her breath straightens. She almost lost it, almost imagined the frayed ends of her father's coat sleeves, his knuckles knobbed like washing machine dials. Almost. Jess hunkers deeper into her coat, aware of her father's depth finder clipped to the zipper of her pocket.

A buzz swells and sharpens behind the tree line. Jess peers toward the lake access. Another snowmobile blasts down the ramp and skids onto the lake, a black sled trailing in its wake. He stops, engine rumbling. Cardinal blazes adorn the sides of the sleek machine. It is the same one as before, towing what looks like a portable ice shanty. *He is back.*

Jess flicks her eyes toward the man, but not her head. She does not want to look like she is staring at him. He idles on the machine and looks around.

Jess refocuses her attention to the hole in the ice and jiggles the minnow up and down. The water is black and still and her line barely breaks the surface. *How dark it must be under there. How quiet.* When Jess hazards another look at the snowmobiler, her insides jolt. She reels her gaze back to the ice in front of her. His eyes were on hers. Her eyes met his.

Jess knows that, from such a distance, this is improbable. She knows the general location of

eyes on a face, of course. She knows if a head, generally speaking, is turned toward her or away. But to mark the roving pupils, to identify the flick of irises upon her own? Impossible. But yet, her body knew. Her body coiled in discernment and froze. Even though Jess could not see his eyes, she knew she contacted them. She knows he is looking at her.

And what would he see? From far away, she might look like a man. Huddled over a hole in boxy layers and rubber boots, her shape is indistinct. Genderless. But her coat—her coat—is black and sky blue, and the colors cut in shapely ways across the breast and torso. Men's coats are monochromatic. Men's coats are straight. Jess pulls the scarf up and hides her chapped face.

The snowmobiler revs the engine. When Jess hears the sound fade, she looks toward the access. *Where did he go?* The snowmobiler is gone, but the black sled remains in the place where he idled. She cannot make out what is in it. Perhaps a bundle of tip ups. Perhaps a foldable shanty. Perhaps something else.

Jess's father hated snowmobiles. He hated their sound and how they disturbed wildlife. *It would be useful to have one now.* How nice to saddle up on a machine that leaves tank tracks in the snow. She could race across the lake. She could pass that man. She could gun it up the public access all the way to her lonely, cold car. No second looks, no consequences.

An engine whines just beyond the tree line of the lake. The snowmobiler reemerges. He is more careful now, slower in his approach. He tows another sled. This one is orange, its bulky contents covered in tarp. *Why does he need another sled?* Jess refocuses, surveys her one tip-up. The flag is a little lick of fire on a white lake. She tells herself she is ice fishing and the snowmobiler is too. Two ice fishers on Moon Lake. That is it; that is all.

An electric auger whines and saws through the lake. Another hole, and then another. Powered by more than muscle and grit, an electric auger cuts holes in seconds. She looks at her auger. Sharp, but a handsaw in comparison to the snowmobiler's. She wonders: *How many holes can a*

lake take before it cracks? The minnow struggles at the end of her line, hooked and writhing to the sound of a dentist's drill.

*

Jess had agreed to take the defense classes, although she recognized her father had not given her much of a choice. She had not managed to convince Teddy, who worked for his father on the weekends. So on a damp Saturday in February, Jess's father drove her to the VFW on Tamarack Road.

It was ten in the morning and the VFW smelled of smoke and beer. Her father entered first. Paintings of leaping bucks hung on the paneled walls; a white-bellied musky shone above the bar like a certificate of achievement. Upon entering, Jess realized the cars she saw parked in the gravel lot did not belong to karate participants.

Men in canvas jackets studded the bar, watching the morning news on a small TV. Some of them had dirty baseball caps; all of them had beer. Like one moving part of a greater machine, they all turned to see who had arrived. A man plucked his cigarette from the thick brown teeth of plastic ashtray and brought it shaking to his lips.

Jess averted her eyes and stared at the doughy, pink toes peeking out from her sandals. She did not feel she had the right to look. In fact, she felt ashamed to. The TV chirped above the bar and was far too bright. Someone changed the channel to sports.

Smiling, Jess's father leaned toward a row of lowballs and looked at the bartender. The men at the bar shifted. "Excuse me, ma'am?" The bartender shot soda out of a gun into a glass. A purple birthmark spilled across her face, ear to chin. "Can you tell me where the community room is?"

The bartender smiled and angled her head toward the back of the building. "Karate? Right back there. Through the dining room." Her father nodded and smiled, and Jess followed him. They wove through high tops, past a virtual golfing game, past a pool table with nicked green felt. Jess felt

stares glance off her bony shoulders, the men at the bar wondering why a white-legged girl with a father they did not recognize was stumbling through the VFW on a Saturday morning.

The community room was a banquet hall. Jess pictured cheap weddings, baptisms, and high school graduations, plastic knives cutting into supermarket cakes with too much frosting. On the far side of the room, the instructor dropped thick, blue mats on the ground. He nodded at Jess's father, who nodded back.

Jess's father rubbed his hands together. "Alright." Jess nodded, although she wished her father would stay. It did not seem fair that he had mandated her participation while he ducked out to read the newspaper and drink coffee. He surveyed his daughter up and down, checking for bodily harm, as he always did before he left her. "Okay. Have fun". He turned and walked back to the bar, jangling his keys.

This class, Jess knew, had checked off a box on a long list of parenting duties her father kept rolled up in his head. He wrote the list a long time ago. He wrote it alone. As a teenager, Jess always felt it served him more than her, that it absolved him of the guilt of being a single parent. Eventually she would realize that writing the list was an act of grief, an act of fear, and that despite his stride, her father did not really know what he was doing.

Jess hovered at the edge of the banquet hall, opening and closing the top of her water bottle, taking sips she did not need. *Click, click, click*. A jeer emanated from the bar. A score, an injury, a win, Jess thought. An insult, a dirty joke. The flush of sound settled and Jess took another sip.

The instructor laid down the final mat and walked toward Jess. He was barefoot and goateed; a sheaf of sandy hair bobbed before him like a palm leaf. Jess wondered if his hair bothered him when he punched and kicked, wondered if it got in his eyes.

“Hi, I’m Chuck.” He shook Jess’s hand. It was dry and efficient, like he practiced at church service each Sunday morning. He pointed to the blue mats. “I’m just setting up. We won’t begin for a few more minutes.”

Several more people wandered through the door. Some middle-aged women in baggy sweatpants, some mothers toting young daughters and sons. Jess watched each one walk up to Chuck, who cleanly shook their hands and registered their names. Thankfully, no one Jess’s age. Thankfully, no one from school. She sipped her water bottle. Her body, all of it, felt uneven and askew.

Chuck arranged the eleven participants along the mats. Jess stood in front between a fifth-grade girl and a forty-year-old woman. The bottoms of her feet felt clammy on the mat. She straightened up and pretended she wasn’t herself, wasn’t Jess Koski at a community self-defense class at the VFW off Tamarack Road. She wanted to forget how dumb her body looked, how troublesome it was.

Chuck introduced himself, made a joke about a movie she had never seen, and all the mothers laughed. He was an accomplished karateka of twenty years, owned Eagle Dojo downtown, and had two children of his own.

“Today we will learn the basic principles of karate and useful moves for self defense.” His hair bounced.

After bowing and learning the proper greeting, Chuck explained the words that signified someone was coming in for an attack. He bent his knees and socked the air. “Ki-eye! Ki-eye!” The speed of his hands made the air look thinner. A real one-two punch. He straightened and grabbed a pair of padded mitts from the floor. “Let’s practice.” Jess’s guts sunk like a slow elevator.

Jess did not like public displays of emotion. She did not like public displays of anything, really. She did not want to be loud. Loud meant you were sure, and she didn't want to look sure in case she was wrong.

Chuck approached the little girl next to Jess. She screamed and punched the red foam mitts. "Ki-eye! Ki-eye!" Her face scrunched. Her ponytail whipped. The little girl was unabashed in her screaming; in fact, she liked it. She smacked Chuck's mitts and yelled again. "Ki-eye!"

"Good!" Chuck smiled and moved down the line. He planted himself in front of Jess and her cheeks prickled with heat. She squared up and eyed the red mitt. She punched.

"Ki-eye." First, she said it like she was talking to herself. A reminder, a self-admonishment.

"Ki-eye." Second, it sounded like a declaration. *Look at that bird! I found the book.*

"Ki-eye!" Third, a Teddy and Jess woods yell. *Watch out! Keep left!*

She stopped, expecting Chuck to move on. Instead, he looked at her seriously, his wave of hair nodding like a lure. "A little louder, now."

Jess burned. She could not do it louder. She did not want to do it louder.

"Ki-eye!" She sunk her fist into the red foam, voice ricocheting off the wood paneling. The sound of it made her cringe. She was naked, loud, unguarded. She wondered if the men at the bar heard and stopped mid-sip.

Chuck made eye contact with Jess. "Good." He did not smile, but instead nodded the way that men do with other men. His hair dipped. Chuck sidestepped down the line to the next woman and raised the red mitt. "Hit me."

Jess unwound, face alight. Her arm felt unhinged, but alive. She liked the way her arm felt, the way the foam both resisted and yielded to her hit. The smack, the fullness of it. Tomorrow she would be sore. She'd have new muscle.

When Jess's father arrived to collect her after practice, he wore his reading glasses. Jess picked up her water bottle and walked toward the dining room. From behind her, she heard Chuck refolding the mats. They hissed as he pushed them across the floor.

Her father held two plastic menus. "Want to get lunch here?"

They sat at one of the high tops near the electronic golf game and watched a little boy shoot over par at a luxury resort in Hawaii.

"So, how was it?" Her father stirred a fry into a pat of ketchup.

Jess shoveled a club sandwich into her mouth. "We didn't do much. Some hitting. Some kicking at the end." As she took a sip of her soda, Chuck walked through the bar. He had on real clothes: jeans, a fleece vest, brown shoes. It was strange to see him as a normal man, not the pillar of discipline that a line of women had punched and kicked.

Jess's father wiped his mouth with a napkin. He saw Chuck disappear. "The instructor any good?"

She thought of the last exercise they did, where Chuck grabbed their arms and they practiced twisting away. His grip was strong. "He's very serious."

Her father nodded. His gaze lingered on a place far beyond Jess's eyes. Catching himself, he refocused and smoothed the paper napkin. "Good. That's very good to hear."

*

The snowmobiler drills five holes into Moon Lake. Jess hears each cut, each time the electric auger breaks through to open water. The daughter of a game warden, she knows three lines are all you get in Michigan. Her father would have approached the man. Would have sighed, would have hiked up his jeans. Would have made a joke about the weather, would have told the snowmobiler the rules. The man would have acquiesced and agreed. He would have listened.

Jess sees no tip-ups, no jigging rods near the holes. They remain open like sores and quickly refreezing in the January cold. After drilling, the snowmobiler had disappeared into his shanty, which unfurled from his black sled like a scene from a pop-up book. A wavy plastic window faces towards Jess. She wonders what the man is doing, whether he is looking at her. She has no shanty, no shelter from the wind.

Jess worries her father's depth finder between her thumb and index finger. It is a simple, blunt object that she keeps clipped to the end of her zipper. On one end is a knot of lead dipped in neon orange paint; on the other, a set of jaws. When her father wanted to know how deep to set his line, he clipped the finder to the end and lowered it into the hole. "Now, watch it go down until it doesn't go anymore." Jess lay on her belly, chin resting on the ice and watched the orb descend into the silent underworld of the sunless, frozen lake.

Jess pinches the finder and invites the serrated edges to bite the callused tips of her fingers. She looks up at the shanty. A black box on a white lake. Five holes, a fast machine, a blade that can eat through ice. A man, hidden.

This, Jess's father could not help her navigate.

*

That summer, Jess practiced. She called Teddy over and they squared up in the sandy dirt behind the deck. Teddy brought his camera and swim towel. Jess's legs were tanned and bruised. "I wanna show you what I've learned. Come at me. Pretend to come at me."

Teddy never made first moves. He was the recipient of moves, or Jess made them for him. He clutched his camera closer to his chest. "I don't want to."

"Come on. I'm not going to hurt you."

Teddy wrapped the towel around his camera and placed it on the ground. He inched forward, hands raised noncommittally before his breast and limp as dead birds. He moved them like he never owned hands. “Okay.” His laugh ended with a nervous flutter. “Don’t kill me.”

Jess crouched. “I’m not that good yet.” Her hands hovered flat and sharp. Teddy stared at them. “I’m not going to hurt you.” Jess looked up at her friend, at the face she knew as well as her father’s. She would never hurt Teddy. At least, not like this. Not intentionally. Not until she was older and realized she had, countless times.

“Okay.” Teddy bent his knees and copied Jess’s crouch.

Jess knew he didn’t like surprises. “We’ll do this slow, alright?” She beckoned him forward. “Pretend you got a knife.”

Teddy raised a fist curled around an invisible handle. Jess imagined a bowie knife but Teddy must have been thinking steak.

“You wanna get me. You wanna take me back to your place and cut me up.” They had plenty of Midwestern role models for this type of thing. Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer, the Ypsilanti Ripper.

Teddy shuffled forward, steak knife aloft, and then maneuvered behind Jess. “What do you want me to do?” His voice was soft, as if he were asking about a bruise. A cool wind filtered through the white pines and raised goosebumps on Jess’s legs.

“Grab me.”

Teddy set his hands upon Jess’s shoulders as if he were about to give her a massage. She sighed and turned around to face him.

“Teddy, you’re the worst rapist ever.” This was an admirable quality, Jess supposed, but not for their current exercise. Teddy looked longingly at his camera.

“What do you want me to do then?”

“Grab my hair.” Jess remembered practicing this move in the dojo. She had flipped her partner to the mat with a satisfying *whomp*. She wanted to do it again.

Teddy laced a hand through Jess’s hair and tugged. She was used to roughness; the boys at the dojo grabbed her hair like she was a scarecrow, as if they didn’t have any hair of their own. Teddy didn’t yank. He easily recognized what caused others pain.

“Okay, I’m going to yank your arm and then kick you from behind.”

Teddy momentarily released his grip. “What?”

“Just trust me.”

Jess wrapped her right arm around Teddy’s and sent her left hand, slow as an airplane, toward his neck. Teddy’s gaze followed her hand until it hovered against the ridges of his throat.

“Here I could chop you.” Teddy remained silent. Jess readjusted her weight and lifted her left leg. She loved this part. “Now I’m going to send you to the ground.” When Teddy nodded, she felt his throat roll against the back of her hand. She felt the crest of his swallow, the beat of his pulse. She would not hurt him, not ever. She could take his weight. She could take his fall. “Move with me.”

Jess swiveled her left leg behind Teddy’s and forced her calf into the crook of his knee. She pushed back on his throat, felt his body pitch back. Teddy buckled. His bangs lifted. Jess saw an expression on Teddy’s face that made her doubt, and then, like Teddy, she too fell to the hard earth.

Jess tumbled on top of Teddy and rolled into the concrete base of the deck. Her foot slammed into an asymmetrical lump, which sailed across the dirt. Jess knew what it was as soon as it flew. The towel unfurled and the camera skid. The clouds shifted overhead.

“Teddy, you okay?” Jess crawled toward her best friend, who had rolled onto his side and scabbled toward the camera. He cradled the camera and ran his hands over the body. “Teddy?”

He counted the buttons and dials and used the front of his t-shirt to clean the lens. His belly was white. Jess walked on painful knees toward him. Besides his car, Teddy's camera was his prized possession.

"I'm sorry. I didn't expect all that dead weight." Dirt caked the creases of his elbows; birdseed clung to his back. "Is the camera broken?"

Teddy clutched it to the gentle cave of his chest. "No." He continued to ease the dials and knobs.

"Are you okay?"

Teddy swiveled another wheel and Jess felt his silence settle upon her like a cold, heavy coat. He didn't look at her. "I'm fine."

He wrapped the towel around the camera and stood up. Dirt dusted off him like snow. Teddy turned away, guarding the camera from view. "You were right, Jess. Good move."

*

The man emerges. Jess sees him from the corner of her eye. He walks to the orange sled, searches its bulky contents and brings something back to the shanty. A six-pack? A book? A fillet knife? No tip-ups, no rods.

Jess gauges the position of the snowmobiler. He parked himself in front of the access like a sentinel; all passage to the road goes through him. Jess could cut through the tree line and navigate the national forest around the lake. But she couldn't take her sled, and that would attract more attention. *A woman abandoning her gear to disappear among the trees.* He could watch every step of the way. The lake was an empty stage.

Jess inventories her tools: an ice auger, a pocketknife, an empty thermos, her hands. Her boots are thick. Her snow pants are clunky. She needs cleats, shorts, a handgun in her coat. She needs a helicopter to land and airlift her away.

She fidgets with the depth finder. *Open and close, open and close.* Jess lets the jaws settle on a thin stamp of skin at the corner of her thumb. She rips it off. The wound smarts, but not as much as other things. Not as much as karate. The pain grounds her.

Jess's father had approached drunk men on boats, drunk men with guns, drunk men who ended up on the side of a county highway, weeping in the cabs of their trucks. He passed his love of the natural world onto her but none of his protection when traversing it alone.

She could run. Where would she go? A national forest in the winter dark.

She could stay. She could wait it out until night arrived. Until the wolves congregated and the moon lit the lake. Until the fishing hole froze over and she did, too.

And what if he was nothing?

Jess hears rumbling beyond the tree line. The high frequency sound of a motor.

A snowmobile with navy blazes rips down the access onto the lake and flourishes. Like a cowboy, the man dismounts, takes off his helmet, and stares at Jess. He enters the shanty.

Jess reels up her jig. The minnow is lifeless. Why pretend any longer?

*

Eagle Dojo smelled of evergreens and lemon, and the wood floor shone like a high school gymnasium. Jess slipped off her sandals and wandered back to the office to find Chuck. On the morning news, she saw the weather report. A line of thunderstorms surging east. Ugly, blotchy, yellow, red. The clouds rumbled when her father dropped her off. She needed to tell Chuck. Rainy weather always brought the tourists in.

Jess had been taking lessons at Eagle Dojo since completing the community defense class in March. Last week, he had asked Jess if she wanted to assist him during an open house event. He wanted to recruit more women in the dojo. "And it would help if they saw you."

Jess tapped on his office door. Chuck fiddled with papers and squinted at the chunky computer on his desk. “You see the rain?”

Chuck sighed. “Yeah. We're going to be swamped.” He grabbed a stack of consent forms and joined Jess at the door. “It'll be a rodeo.” He switched off the light and they both walked into the open studio.

“What do you need help with?” The smell of cleaning solvent wafted off him. Chuck was so clinical and antiseptic. The floor never collected lint.

“I'm going to need you to corral them, mostly.” He unrolled two twenties from his wallet and handed them to her. “And help me demonstrate a few maneuvers.”

Jess took the creased bills and hid them in her fist. She felt shy about such a blunt exchange of money. She didn't know what to do with bills, where to put them. “Thank you, Chuck.”

He hit her gently on the arm and smiled. “Gotta save up for college.”

Like a groomsmen's tie, Chuck had loosened since Jess met him in February. She learned Chuck owned a motorcycle, an iguana, a rock polisher, a big gas grill. He drove back home in a half-rusted Toyota Tercel, white karate gi folded neatly in back.

The participants began to filter in. One by one, boys in neon t-shirt and athletic sandals burst through the door, karate-chopping their siblings in the arm. The mothers hovered around Chuck, feet spilling over the tight strictures of their sandals as they filled out paperwork.

Jess surveyed the room. *Boys, all boys.* Boys between the ages of ten and fourteen. The type of boys she hadn't dealt with for several years.

She knew all of their dirty jokes. She knew the myriad of ways one could refer to a pair of breasts, to an ass, to the act of sex. Assigned to a seat at the back of the bus, she heard all the things these boys said when their mothers weren't around.

Now all of those boys were here, soon to be collected before her in rows, eyes bent on her body. She knew what they were saying. She knew what they were thinking. Their thoughts reeled through her mind like ticker tape on the evening news. Jess pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and walked to the bathroom.

Inside, Jess stared at her face in the mirror. It was disappointing but ultimately, the same. She adjusted her karate gi and bent over, assessing how far she could bow before seeing her undershirt.

The rumble of voices and movement permeated through the door. Jess pictured the boys mingling and sucker punching each other in the guts, high kicking and shouting “Hi-ya!” as Chuck scrambled to sign them in. She thought about the mothers outside, whether their sons had begged to be here or whether they had been forced to come. *Learn a little discipline.* Jess had plenty of that. That’s not why she took karate.

She straightened up and breathed. *Okay.* Jess pushed her hair behind her ear and re-entered the noisy, golden heart of the dojo.

Out on the floor, Chuck assembled the boys into rows. He nodded at Jess. Chuck taught students from the age of five to sixty and had two children of his own. He knew how to manage a swarm.

They began on their knees. Not quite sure where Chuck wanted her to be, Jess attached herself to the end of the first row and stood next to a boy with thick glasses. He was young, and the way his bangs fell reminded her of Teddy.

Chuck gathered their attention. One by one, he collected their gazes and dropped them into his magic bag. His voice had this quality, had the power to compel one to look. Jess remembered the austerity with which he told her to yell louder, to hit harder. His seriousness inspired seriousness.

Jess felt the collective energy of the boys settle and sharpen as Chuck spoke quietly of care and respect and responsibility. No hitting friends. No hitting dogs.

“In karate, there is no attacking.” Chuck looked each and every boy in the eye. Outside, the clouds surrendered. The dojo filled with the sound of rain.

After bowing, Chuck pointed toward Jess. “Jess Koski will be helping me today. She practices in this dojo.” Jess felt their eyes wheel toward her. She was the only woman on the floor. Chuck beckoned her forward. “Do not underestimate Jess.”

They started with punches. Chuck handed Jess a red mitt and they alternated rows, taking hits. Unlike her, the boys had no problem yelling and striking the mitt. “Ki-eye! Ki-eye!” Some boys were older and tried to impress her with the force of their strikes. Some still chewed with baby teeth. Jess squared herself against every hit.

After hits, they kicked. After kicks, they practiced wrangling themselves away from potential attackers. Chuck called Jess up front for a demonstration. It was the move she executed on Teddy, the move that would make the boys beg their parents for classes at Eagle Dojo. Chuck addressed his audience. “Eventually, you can do this.”

Chuck clutched the back of Jess’s karate gi, as if he were seizing her from behind. Jess had done this in the dojo, but this was the first time she performed the maneuver with Chuck. His grip was insistent. He yanked her towards him. Chuck was no Teddy.

In a flash, Jess wrapped her arm around Chuck’s, launched her arm towards his throat and her leg behind his knees. *Wham.* Chuck flew backward into the mat. The sound echoed between the walls of the dojo. Like a boulder falling, like the thunder cracking outside. She offered Chuck a hand up.

“Whoa!” The boys erupted into sound. Their attention, so carefully gathered and shaped by Chuck, fractured with Jess’s takedown. It was confetti in the air. She adjusted her karate gi and suppressed a smile.

Chuck placed his hand on Jess’s shoulder and whispered. “Nice job.” He turned to the participants. “Now, let’s say that an attacker goes for your hair.”

Jess did not know which move he implied. Chuck leaned his face toward hers, hair bobbing. He whispered again. “Follow my lead.” The dojo was warm and wet with exertion and the sweat of twenty boys. Chuck no longer smelled like lemon and pine. He turned to his young men and narrated the scene.

“He grabs your hair.” Chuck yanked Jess’s ponytail. Hard, Jess thought. Real.

“His arm is extended, so you wrap your arms around his elbow.” Jess encircled her arms around his. His grip on her hair was tight. She wished Chuck would give, just a little bit. She imagined strands ripping from their fleshy sockets.

He whispered. “A little bit farther in, Jess.” He invited her hands under his armpit. Heat radiated along Jess’s wrists.

“And step through.”

Step through? Jess had never done this move before. She looked at Chuck, hoped he would catch her confusion. *Help?*

Chuck knew what to do. In fact, he planned it. He grabbed Jess’s right leg and lifted it below waist. He pulled it against his groin. Calf to crotch, he held it there.

Jess tensed all the muscles in her leg, levering it, trying to create an inch of space between her leg and his body. A mistake, she thought. *He doesn’t know how close he is.* When she let her leg drop, Chuck pulled it back in.

“Now, push with your leg.” He slung her thigh across his thin hips like a loose belt. He knew exactly how close he was. Jess felt the bulge in between his legs, the bones of his pelvis.

“A bit higher.” He slid his hands to her upper leg and hoisted it against his body. “There.”

“Now, you twist away.” Her twist put pressure on his elbow. Her twist released Chuck’s hand from her hair. And, playacting the role of injured attacker, Chuck released her leg from his body.

“Let’s give Jess a hand.” Jess’s face twitched and she returned to her spot in the dojo. The boys applauded. She didn’t hear.

Jess’s leg tingled. Her heart pounded. No one in that dojo had long hair. No one needed that move. No one but Jess.

At the end of class, Jess slipped past the boys signing up for classes and exited the door. The storm had passed and the air felt like human breath. Hot, stale, body-warmed breath. Breath that climbed like fingers down her throat. She rocked back and forth on her heels, choking on the air. Steam lifted from the blacktop.

Her father was always early, never late. She willed him to drive faster down the county highway. She willed cars to disappear and the roads to clear. *Come on, come on.* Jess curled her toes in her wet sandals. She pushed her wet hair from her wet face. She jumped when a boy flew out the door behind her. Cold air from dojo crawled up Jess’s wet back.

And then not the car, but him. Jess’s father rounded the corner, reading glasses perched atop his nose. His temples were damp with sweat but he still wore jeans. Jess wished he had just driven up, wished she could have escaped into the car she knew so well. Her father nodded, but not at her.

The click of the door, the rush of cold. And then a hand on her shoulder. Chuck’s hand, pale and bristling with hair. The hand that grabbed the inside of her leg and crushed it against his hips.

She wanted to elbow him and drop him like she was taught, like he taught her to do. She wondered if he would have reacted. Instead, Jess pretended like nothing was wrong. Chuck squeezed her shoulder. “Thanks again, Jess. I appreciate it.”

Chuck nodded back at Jess’s father. He walked to his Toyota Tercel in shorts and a t-shirt, no longer robed in white. He was regular Chuck. Regular man Chuck. Like anyone, like these tourists, like all the damn people on the street.

Her father fiddled with the keys in his pockets. He craned his head toward the sky. “Storm passed. Wanna get lunch?”

Jess sat in a hard chair above the air conditioning vent. Each bite turned to cotton in her mouth. She struggled to swallow, struggled to remain interested in food. Every few minutes, her father asked a question. It took him long time to reel up questions from the deep.

“How’d it go?”

“Fine.”

“A lot of kids?”

“Yeah.”

Jess’s father never interrogated her reticence. He took it as is, accepted it more than he should. Jess felt a wild tangling in her chest. She hated his complacency with silence. It was all he knew. It was all she knew, too. The vent gasped more cold air and goose bumps slithered up her calves, touched her thighs.

The sensation replayed on her body. Chuck’s hands on the points of her hips, rotating them. Chuck had pulled her leg to his crotch. She felt him. He made her feel him. He must have known. He must.

The arrival of the waitress punctured their silence. Jess was grateful for the sound. “How is everything?” She looked from Jess to her father. Her ponytail swung from shoulder to shoulder.

Young, post-college, amiable wrinkles at the eyes. “Ready for the check?”

Jess looked at her father, who looked at the waitress. “Yes, please.” The waitress smiled, and just as she turned, Jess saw it. Her father’s eyes. She witnessed it: the shy, unconscious assessment of the waitress’s body. Hardly a moment. How had she never seen it before?

Jess felt something like a fat slug settle in the cavity of her chest. Of course Chuck knew. Of course he did.

When the waitress returned with the change, Jess buried her eyes in her plate. She was sick of noticing. She didn’t want to see anything anymore. Her father pushed the little leather book back into the waitress’s hands. “Keep the change.”

She smiled. “Thank you. You two have nice day, now.” The waitress turned and hustled to the next table, aware in ways Jess was just becoming.

On their way out, Jess’s father held the door for her and squinted in the sun. “Maybe Chuck wants to hire you for the summer?”

Jess felt choked, gagged. The sun was too bright and the ground, too wet.

“I don’t think so.”

*

The shanty stands like a dark sphinx on the lake. It is nothing more than a black box, a pullout shelter from an ice fishing sled, but Jess shivers whenever it lingers in the corner of her vision. The little window, its periscope. What bothers her is the vision she knows they have and she does not.

She wishes the lake would heave and split. She wishes a giant fissure would sunder the men from her. She wishes she had a clear way back to the car, an easy passage. But she does not and

never has, so she reels up the line of her jigging rod and stares at the still body of her silver minnow. Jess is familiar with this feeling of surrender. Karate, she learned, is as much about strength as it is about submission.

Jess gathers her gear. She drops her frozen minnow back into the bucket and lays the auger in the sled. The tip-ups, unbitten, remain cocked. Jess walks to the holes and lifts them from the black water. Tomorrow, the holes will be iced over. Jess always marveled at how quickly a lake erased the work of a blade. The lake was good at scabbing over, at continuing.

She thumbs the depth finder once more. *What if she had told her father?* Jess imagines him trying—trying so hard—to dredge the right words from the deepest part of him. She can see him standing in the kitchen, hand on heart, coming up with nothing. Jess tugs the frayed rope of her dead father's sled. Perhaps it is good she never said. She reckons, in a small part of her heart, he already knew.

Jess thinks of her father on the ice all those years ago, fearless and young, and she begins the long march across the thin sickle of a lake. In the distance, the two men exit the shanty. A motor revs and howls at the moon.

Jess carries her father's sled, his auger, his pocketknife. She carries his quiet, his duty, his heavy steps. But Jess is not her father, so her hand is flat and her ears, attuned. The wind blows from behind. She prepares herself. She always has and always will.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexie, Sherman. *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*. Little, Brown and Company, 2017.
- Beard, Jo Ann. *The Boys of My Youth: Autobiographical Essays*. Back Bay Books, 1999.
- Butler, Nickolas. *Beneath the Bonfire*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2015.
- . *The Hearts of Men*. Ecco, 2017.
- . *Shotgun Lovesongs*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2014.
- Butler, Robert Olen and Janet Burroway. *From Where You Dream: the Process of Writing Fiction*. Grove Press, 2006.
- Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead Books, 2008.
- . *Drown*. Riverhead Books, 1996.
- . *This Is How You Lose Her*. Riverhead Books, 2013.
- Doerr, Anthony. *All The Light We Cannot See*. Scribner, 2014.
- . *Memory Wall: Stories*. Scribner, 2011.
- . *The Shell Collector: Stories*. Scribner, 2011.
- Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medicine*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984.
- . *Tracks*. Henry Holt, 1988.
- Harrison, Jim. *True North*. Grove Press, 2005.
- Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 1st Perennial classics ed., Perennial, 2002.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. Ballantine Books, 1986.
- MacIvor-Andersen, Josh. *Rooted: The Best New Arboreal Nonfiction*. Outpost19, 2017.
- Miller, Robert W., et al. *Urban Forestry*. 3rd ed., Waveland Press, 2015.
- Pancake, Ann. *Strange As This Weather Has Been*. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007.
- Perry, Michael. *Population: 485*. Harper Collins, 2001.

Strout, Elizabeth. *Amy and Isabelle*. Vintage, 2000.

---. *My Name Is Lucy Barton*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2017.

---. *Olive Kitteridge*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008.

Wohlleben, Peter. *The Secret Life of Trees*. Greystone Books, 2016.