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Brilliant Women: Prose and Poetry

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BRILLIANT WOMEN: PROSE AND POETRY

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Amelia Fisher

May 2020

BRILLIANT WOMEN: PROSE AND POETRY

English

Missouri State University, May 2020

Master of Arts

Amelia Fisher

ABSTRACT

This collection of creative writing explores themes and subjects relating to feminism, sexuality, performativity, societal woes, popular culture, and the different ways we communicate. The individual pieces often examine women's empowerment and lack thereof. These stories, essays, and poems are introduced by a critical work situating the contents of the thesis within greater literary traditions, such as Viktor Shklovsky's defamiliarization, which I claim can function on the structural level as well as the story level, and his theory of the Chronotope; time and place are significant threads I follow from one genre to the next to create a cohesive collection of multi- and cross-genre pieces of creative writing.

KEYWORDS: creative writing, prose, poetry, short fiction, memoir essay, defamiliarization, uncanny, identity, chronotope, experimental selves, feminism

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Blurring the Boundaries: Defamiliarizing Form and Content in Creative Writing	Page 1
Works Cited	Page 8
Fiction	
Brilliant Women	Page 9
Low Visibility	Page 13
The Apocalypse	Page 33
Arkansas Menagerie	Page 34
For the Sake of Appearances	Page 37
Ice Cold	Page 50
Tactile	Page 51
Nonfiction	
To Be Earth-Like	Page 62
Babies: A Lyric Essay for my Uncle	Page 64
July 19, 2018	Page 68
Poetry	
Ode to Weeds	Page 79
Pseudoscience	Page 80
Crossroads, A Heatwave	Page 81
Columbine	Page 82
Big Tree	Page 83
Enchanted Forest	Page 85
Disposable	Page 86
Star Signs	Page 87
Why I Like Bad Boys According to the PCL-5	Page 88

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES: DEFAMILIARIZING FORM AND CONTENT IN CREATIVE WRITING

Brilliant Women, a hybrid collection of full-length and flash fiction, memoir, lyric essays, and poetry, aims to present themes and subjects that are familiar to many readers in a strange way, to achieve what literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky called *ostranenie*. In his 1917 essay “Art as Technique,” he claims that “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Sher 2). An oversimplified definition lies in the direct translation of *ostranenie*, the Russian word for defamiliarization: making strange. This thesis explores questions surrounding identity through multi- and cross-genre works; while I switch between fiction and nonfiction and poetry, I also attempt to blur the boundaries between these modes. I have been inspired by writers like George Saunders, Jennifer Egan, and Hanif Abdurraqib, who experiment with structure. The practice of bending genres and playing with form can act as an extension of defamiliarizing content. I’ve also found it useful in the expression of the multiplicity of the female experience within and outside the home.

I most comfortably write about women. I read other works of fiction about women, written by women, all while grappling with my own womanhood and what it means to be a woman in twenty-first-century America. But I also wanted to speculate like Carmen Maria Machado and Ursula Le Guin. I relate to the Modernists in their struggle that, as described by writer and theorist Charles Baxter, “involved finding a way of introducing novelty into writing, the appearance of the newborn, the aesthetics of shock and surprise” (“On Defamiliarization”

27). I've found Sigmund Freud's element of the Uncanny, "the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1-2), to be useful as I developed the short story "Low Visibility" which aimed to replace the "pleasures of security" with the "pleasures of the unknown" ("On Defamiliarization" 28). Machado's short story "Eight Bites" does this while articulating the idea that a woman's experience equates her identity. If you have a child, you are a mother, and if you never lost the baby weight, you are fat, and nothing else. Nicholas Royle ties the uncanny to defamiliarization in the 2003 book *The Uncanny*. In the introduction, he claims that "the unfamiliar, in other words, is never fixed, but constantly altering. The uncanny is (the) unsettling (of itself)" (5). In "Eight Bites," the uncanny represents the weight the protagonist lost after lap band surgery and is presented as a "body with nothing it needs: no stomach or bones or mouth" (Machado 165). In "Low Visibility," smog functions as an uncanny element, the unexpected piece of magic that belongs in a nightmare but exists in the story's reality. It sneaks up on my main character on the train, in her own home, and in the end, it suffocates her. It is most present in her life when she is comparing herself to other women and judging them. The way Machado merges the uncanny with her protagonist's reality is something I keep turning to for inspiration during my own writing process.

My poems vary in form and content, but in the style of poets like Ezra Pound and Chen Chen, they will rely on strong and precise imagery. In the same way some of my prose is influenced by folklore and legends, my poetry and its images are heavily influenced by fairy tales and magical realism. In my imitation poem "The Enchanted Forest," the speaker drinks from a bottle of syrup left on her front porch by her neighbor. She's taken back to the forest she once roamed as a child, but this time, everything looks a little different. By setting up a world where the "unnatural" is "natural," this poem achieves defamiliarization. While my poetry often

explores themes relating to my personal identity, I also explore and societal woes, often utilizing the uncanny.

I hope to achieve defamiliarization as Charles Baxter describes it: “It's like that moment when, often early in the morning, perhaps in a strange house, you pass before a mirror you hadn't known would be there. You see a glimpse of someone reflected in that mirror, and a moment passes before you recognize that that person is yourself. Literature exists in moments like that” (39). Many of the poems in this collection aim to construct strong narrative that use conceits, like Adriene Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck;” its speaker, whose “name does not appear” in the “book of myths,” narrates their descent into the water and exploration of the wreck. The poem’s clear dramatic situation functions as an elaborate metaphor for abstract ideas. Another technique my poetry will employ is double-voicing, which, according to Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, is the “microdialogue” between the “narrating self” and the “narrated self” (185–186). In the award-winning poem “Why I Like Bad Boys According to the PCL-5,” the speaker grapples with the aftermath of a traumatic experience and how it affects their relationships. This piece also plays with lines and spacing, creating a disrupted effect. There is close attention paid to sound throughout “Why I Like Bad Boys” and all my poetry.

This piece, along with the short story “Tactile” and personal essay “July 19, 2018,” is influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” where he claims, “narrative [is] shaped by a specific way of conceptualizing the possibilities of action” (370). This theoretical work reflects on the representations of time and space in literature, and I use techniques that manipulate the readers’ experiences of time and space, or the chronotope, by experimenting with form, structure, and narration. I resist chronology in “Tactile” and often use the imagined worlds technique to “thicken” time (Bakhtin 84). This technique allows me to

speculate even in nonfiction, which I found myself doing as I examined the Branson Duck Boat accident in “July 19, 2018.” Although Bakhtin’s theory of chronotope is framed in fiction, I wanted to let it inform the other genres, as well. I hope to have constructed “one carefully thought-out, concrete whole,” where “time. . . takes on flesh,” and “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” in “July 19, 2018” (84). I work with this theoretical approach in “Columbine,” as well, a poem that defamiliarizes school shootings by juxtaposing the definitions of “Columbine,” a jarring homonym that names a common flower as well as an infamous mass murder.

While I have never experienced a tragedy like Columbine firsthand, I use writing to help understand and come to terms with complex emotions like grief. I relate to John Gardner’s discussion of applying emotion in fiction in an interview with *The Paris Review*: “I use feelings that I have myself – the only feelings I know, directly – and I deal them out to a group of characters, and let the characters fight out the problems that I’ve been fighting out” (Ferguson). The protagonist in “Low Visibility” grapples with loneliness, a state I had been living in as I developed the story. Gardner explains the way he draws from his own life in his writing; rather than “celebrating [his] own life,” he applies an “old unanswerable philosophical question” that concerns him personally to his characters (Ferguson). I believe these old questions can lead to thoughtful, thematic writing. Throughout my college career, what I’ve learned about crafting themes is summed up nicely in Janet Burroway’s *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*: “Finally, through revision, through deciding what to cut and what to commit to, you will, or at least might, arrive at a story that is of a piece, a story that is organic, a story that cannot be reduced to theme, but that embodies one” (348). The theory of defamiliarization and its specific

methods that are used to create its unsettling effect led me to a fuller understanding of what it means to write something that somehow extends beyond a piece of writing.

I want my fiction to be driven by its characters. According to Milan Kundera, a well-crafted character “is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self” (34). As I understand this concept, an experimental self is a living and breathing individual, rather than a stagnant or flat portrait; but what brings these characters to life? According to Kundera, it is their “existential problems.” To identify and, in turn, analyze these problems, you must “[get] to the bottom of some situations, some motifs, even some words that shape [them]” (Kundera 35). These “words that shape” are what Kundera refers to as “existential codes;” In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera explains the way themes are presented through his characters:

To apprehend the self in my novels means to grasp the essence of its existential problem. To grasp its *existential code*. As I was writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words. For Tereza: body, soul, vertigo. . . Each of these words has a different meaning in the other person’s existential code. . . Vertigo is one of the keys to understanding Tereza. It’s not the key to understanding you or me. And yet both of us know that sort of vertigo at least as a possibility for us, one of the possibilities of existence. I had to invent Tereza, an ‘experimental self,’ to understand that possibility, to understand vertigo. (Kundera 29-31)

This is how readers analyze the existential problems of experimental selves, but how can writers *characterize* an authentic experimental self? Gardner describes a method of characterization:

“As I spin out the action, I’m always very concerned with springing discoveries—actual philosophical discoveries. But at the same time I’m concerned—and finally more concerned—with what the discoveries do to the character who makes them, and to the people around him.” It seems that, according to these two novelists, that if characterization is done right, a character’s actions become out of the writer’s control. At least, that is the illusion that a writer should be trying to construct and present. I use this framework to map out my two full-length stories, “Low Visibility” and “Tactile.” In both of these pieces, there is clear external conflict, but I really

focus on the interiority of my main characters. I am especially interested in how place and culture can influence works of creative writing; In a piece of flash fiction titled “Arkansas Menagerie,” culture and place not only inform the plot but the characters, as well. Much of my poetry is inspired by my upbringing in the Ozarks, specifically “Big Tree,” an allusion to an official landmark in Columbia, Missouri.

This thesis is representative of my entire body of creative work in graduate school so far. After studying work by writers like Elena Ferrante, whose novels defamiliarize the female experience with unexpected comparisons and imagery, and Maggie Nelson, whose memoir *The Argonauts* has been defined as an “autotheory” due to its hybrid form, I began experimenting more and, ultimately, finding my voice. By allowing the lines between fiction, nonfiction, and poetry to dissolve, I am able to tell the stories I want to tell. This collection is just the beginning.

Defamiliarization has led to a shift in my writing, from failed attempts at writing something that has never been written before, to taking something that readers have grown comfortable with and turning it into something strange and unfamiliar. When it comes to writing about women and their search for identities, it is one of the best theories to work with because of how complicated the everyday lives of women can be. For us, practicing independence and autonomy can be boldly dangerous. Defamiliarization helps me transfer that eerie feeling of the unknown waiting around each street corner, of being someone’s ideal victim, of disassociation that so many women practice in their daily routines into my short stories. The prose that has influenced me the most provides me with high levels of emotional connection. When I read Saunders and Machado and Ferrante and Nelson, I understand what Baxter means when he says that “literature exists in moments like. . . when, often early in the morning, perhaps in a strange house, you pass before a mirror you hadn’t known would be there. You see a glimpse of

someone reflected in that mirror, and a moment passes before you recognize that that person is yourself' (39). If my writing is revealing in any way, if it haunts a single reader, I will be happy and consider myself successful.

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FICTION

Brilliant Women

Caroline gave me her soul for a couple of reasons. One, she owed me; two, she wanted to be a pioneer, and we were on the brink of a scientific revolution that would change *everything*, from religion to medicine to our own mortality. She had spent most of her last few conscious weeks testing and tweaking the formula. It's what allowed us to locate souls and extract them. It was a tedious, demanding process. We needed resources even after withdrawing our savings accounts and investments. So, we fundraised door-to-door like little boys and girls, looking as helpless as possible as we asked strangers for their support. We never told them we were the scientists, because we didn't feel like getting repeatedly rejected.

We had done all the work we could without an actual soul for experimentation, which limited us at first. But it was during this time when we discovered that every animal has a soul. We hooked up Caroline's golden retriever and the SoulScan lit up like a Christmas Tree, which wasn't nearly as surprising as the fruit fly analysis. We didn't expect to find anything worth noting in their cells, but our hypothesis was wrong. Caroline was especially quiet for the rest of the day; if *all* animals had souls, even the microscopic, annoying kind, which was the tale our research was telling, then what does that mean for us?

"What about bacteria?" she asked after the fruit flies.

"I don't know," I lied. I didn't have the guts to acknowledge what our results were pointing to: Anything with DNA has a soul as desperate and precious as our own.

Maybe that's why she was so ready to give hers up when the time came. We probably wouldn't have been friends if we hadn't met in the dorms during undergrad. She was everything

I wasn't: Soft, shy. She never talked in class but knew all the answers, not because she didn't want the credit, but because silence was all her parents and their church taught daughters about. We both worked hard and made a great team. Boys and professors no longer overlooked Caroline, thanks to me, and she promised she'd never forget what I'd done for her. She promised she'd repay me. It was during our first molecular biology lab together when she told me about soul searching, her "passion project."

"Sounds like a new workout trend," I said as I swirled a blue liquid around a glass beaker, and Caroline adjusted her safety goggles. She looked like a bug.

"Believe me, there's no exercise equipment involved." She went on to explain this theory of hers that tackled the questions other scientists had been too scared to ask.

"Something like a soul must exist," she said, "there must be more to us than meat and electricity."

Of course, Caroline was right all along, but she had no idea just how right she would be. Souls are tangible and can be unraveled like thread on a spool, and I was ready to start collecting and comparing samples from different species. But I hurt her feelings when I laughed after she claimed it wouldn't feel right to play god like that. I couldn't help it. There we were, calculating the body-to-soul ratio, blurring the boundary between physical science and metaphysics, and my research partner was worried about extraterrestrial consequences.

I missed Caroline once she was gone, despite my desire to hold a soul with my own two hands and present it at international conferences like some sort of zoo animal. But we held tightly onto our belief that if one could extract a soul from a body, then one could install a soul into a body, as well. So, we kept Caroline alive on a breathing machine. Though she was just a

vegetable, I rolled my squeaky stool over to her bedside and gave her a rundown of the results after each experiment.

"After synthesizing the data I gathered over a period of 120 hours, I've concluded that human souls do not sleep."

At first, Caroline's soul was the color of the sky right before the sun sets completely. Maybe more like a pair of jeans or a handful of globe thistles. It pulsed like a beating heart, twitched like a hooked fish. I was afraid to touch the slippery sheen that protected its insides from predators like me.

After five days of observation, though, Caroline's soul no longer squirmed or throbbed, and its color dulled from a complex indigo to a matte black. As it cowered in the back corner of its cage and shivered as if our lab was some sort of pound, I tried to soothe it by playing Frank Sinatra, Caroline's favorite.

"He was a wife beater," I told her as we folded clothes that weren't quite dry at the Laundromat. I was never a fan.

"You're the one with a Tupac poster on your wall."

"So?"

"He raped a girl," she said with a shrug. How did she know that? I didn't know what to say, and for some reason my feelings were hurt. I took the poster down.

"You're only mad because it's more comfortable than being wrong."

But not even Ol' Blue Eyes could put the pep back in Caroline's soul's step.

"It appears that the soul only has one state of consciousness. Though our body needs rest, our soul seems to need something else. I will report back when I've figured out what that is." I retreated to Caroline's caged soul after reviewing my notes and cleaning up our workspace. It

was starting to feel more like Caroline than her useless body did. That was the first time I talked to it.

"What is it you need?" The soul said nothing, of course. It just kept quivering in the corner. I was compelled to unlock the door and cradle it, but I knew any sort of physical contact with the mysterious ectoplasm could be dangerous; not only could it kill, but my touch would compromise all the work I'd done. All the work *we'd* done. Now, it was my job to figure it out, to save the soul of this brilliant woman.

Low Visibility

The gas masks looked like props off a movie set. Andrea could see her reflection in the goggles. If the sirens were to blare, and if Richard received the order, they would have to position these masks on their faces and huddle in the hall. Her breath would get ahead of itself, and he would keep as silent as a hunter. When they search for comfort in each other's faces, they'd only see these apocalyptic bug-eyes. If there was an attack, would these masks even keep them alive? Of course, she hoped to never need them, but Andrea was obsessed with their existence in her home. The gas masks gave her a similar feeling to the one you would get during tornado warnings as a kid in Kansas, the same feeling that would cause you to slip a tab of acid under your tongue or cheat on your fiancé. She closed the cardboard flaps before sliding the box back to the corner of the closet. They were accessible yet hidden away, exactly where necessities like gas masks should be kept.

She joined Richard in their office, a second bedroom that most of the other newlyweds on base used as a nursery. He was hanging a frame on the wall.

"Does that look even to you?" he asked. Andrea took a step back and cocked her head like a concerned dog.

"Sure." He was unconvinced. "But doesn't it seem a little early to be hammering nails into walls? We still have dishes to unpack," she said. Richard looked around their boxy, concrete home and then back at his wife, smirking.

"I figured the place could use a homey touch." He put his arm around her shoulder, and she leaned into his chest. The closeted gas masks flashed in her mind.

"Thank you," she said after a moment spent admiring his choice: their diplomas, side by side in the same frame. To its left was a large window that overlooked their neighborhood.

Hundreds of identical roofs dotted the slopes and dipped into valleys, a familiar view to many American suburbanites like herself. But beyond the carefully planned community lie a polluted skyline. Seoul's skyscrapers and murky lights towered over their tiny city like the Berlin Wall. But even further beyond these grayscale buildings stood ancient mountains, with peaks hidden by highly saturated clouds of different hues, as if Mother Nature and fate teamed up to isolate Andrea and Richard as much as earthly possible.

Once a week, the wives of the American officers stationed in Yongsan were obligated to meet and discuss matters that concerned them. Andrea was late for her first meeting, looking flustered and underdressed as she took a seat next to the only Korean woman there. The colonel's wife in the sunny yellow kimono walked out onto the balcony of the clubhouse. She carried a tea kettle as if it were a mysterious, unmarked package that would explode from any sudden movement. When she lifted the dainty lid to steep an herbal blend, steam barreled from the opening and circled around itself like a ballerina. Everyone was quiet; the wives seemed to equate silence and stillness with manners.

"So, as you all know, we are here today to decide on which charity we will be supporting with our annual fundraiser," the colonel's wife said, her hands clasped together, making intensely cheery eye contact with each individual woman at the table as she spoke. Andrea stirred a cube of sugar into her teacup, the silver spoon clinking against the porcelain. "We have narrowed it down to three so far." She listed three charities Andrea found to be self-serving and very *Western*. The wives, a rainbow of floral robes, looked pleased. Andrea squirmed. She thought about how much Sasha would have hated this. And how she would have spoken up.

“Aren’t there any local organizations that need donations?” Andrea knew the answer had to be yes, but the other wives’ eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “It might be nice to make an impact on the greater community, not just Yongsan.”

“I’m sorry, but we all made our proposals last week,” The colonel’s wife said.

“I just moved here last week,” Andrea said.

“Maybe next year. Thank you for your input, though.” The colonel’s wife showed off her dimples before making a grand gesture with her arms, her kimono almost whipping Andrea in the face.

The ticket machine *ka-chinged* and blinked red and spit Andrea’s card on the other side of the rotating gate. She walked, looking straight ahead, and could hear the trains close by, shooting through the underground tunnels of Seoul. She was used to the subway as a former latchkey kid, riding whatever lines led her to smooth-talking teenage boys. This station, though, and all the cars she had boarded since the very first one outside the airport, brimmed with bodies. Andrea would have never believed she’d come to consider the Newark City Subway comfortable, or that she’d miss ninety-nine cents fountain sodas and heatwaves. Korea’s gloomy climate drained its light and stained her imagination gray. The landing beneath her feet was proof of ability, but the low, cement ceiling stifled any sense of freedom. A mother and her preschooler hidden behind a cotton surgical mask, an older woman carrying a brown paper bag of vegetables, a homeless man, a college student with a skateboard, and some other unassuming men and women stared at Andrea. Despite her average height and wardrobe full of neutrals, here she attracted the kind of attention she had always been encouraged to curb with modesty. But no department stores sold one-piece swimsuits with the kind of coverage she needed to deny her

impossible notoriety. When she'd first arrived in Korea, she feigned ignorance the way Sasha would every time they showed up to a frat party, floating above the rest of them on her pedestal. It didn't matter, though, how strongly Andrea summoned leftover energy from freshman year that still lived in her bones and, sometimes, crept up to the surface late at night while Richard slept, itching her skin from the inside; she could not sustain a spirit such as Sasha's. Too many resignations had smothered her spark, sealed her fate. Sasha's fire burned across endless fields of tall grass. It was a sight to see. Until she left for college, Andrea had only watched those with enough tinder and kindling to fuel their flames from afar, in awe of the easy existence some babies are blessed with. From its conception, she knew their friendship had a short fuse; in her experience, people with plenty of supporters tending their fires were gullible. The constant glow veiled their vision rose gold. The world Andrea knew bent to the will of nothing and no one, while Sasha seemed to rule hers with custom laws of physics.

Andrea's sweaty discomfort rolled down her temple, and a stream of shallow thoughts sloshed around her brain. How much time had passed since her descent into the tunnel? She wondered if she even had it in her: A desk job in the city meant thirty-minute commutes, five days a week, daily performances in the sold-out theaters of the metro. As she'd settled into her new home, she'd intended to push boundaries and lower her guard. Andrea would never be a headliner, but she'd discovered a little vulnerability went a long way. Her life was never the same after Sasha showed her its power. Pain lingered, of course, and Andrea entertained the idea that the fort she'd spent sixteen years building was worth protecting after a ll. Her anxiety undoubtedly worsened in the face of neglected honesty. Sasha must have been on to something, though, because their connection awakened a need within Andrea that had not been fulfilled since.

How nice would it have been, Andrea thought, if her white rarity coupled with the marvel from mouths of natives was all it took to satisfy her desire for human interaction. The crowds of strangers that stalked her, though, had no interest in reciprocating Andrea's vulnerability. In fact, she thought, their gazes stopped short of ever actually seeing her, too fixed on the differences to consider the experience they shared.

At the landing, Andrea's hair blew back as the train arrived and screeched to a stop like a metal knife against ceramic. The industrial lights above her swayed, stretching her shadow into something from a bad dream. Passengers prepared to storm the gates like bulls in bucking chutes, because anything else would be better than this hellhole, Andrea thought, where they might as well be in line for the slaughter. Cows might even resist more.

The conductor announced something in Korean through a microphone that cracked like the swollen joints of her granddad, a Salmon farmer with a nasty tobacco habit. Silence followed the last pop, then stillness. Andrea kept birthday cards, Polaroids, collectable coins, grocery lists, any bits or pieces of her grandparents in a small chest, solid wood. On sleepless nights, she sat amongst the treasures, visited, and remembered why she could not give up. Andrea stood facing the train with her back toward the wall of boldly dressed commuters and reminded herself of the times her anxiety has lied to her. Sasha asked her years ago why she obsessed over everything that could go wrong instead of what could go right. Andrea's explanation compared her smolder to Sasha's roaring flame. Despite the negativity, though, and whether she had a choice, Andrea regarded whatever came out of Sasha's mouth and imagined she'd recall her words of wisdom as long as she remembered them.

But the silence of the subway drowned out any other thought and had her convinced: Something was wrong. She wondered why she felt like she was in trouble, as if she was

responsible for the public transportation issue. The need to escape clung to her chest, but her options were limited, especially considering how deep she was in the crowd. She stole a quick scan of the faces around. None of them showed a single sign of distress, a reassuring sign that whatever the problem was, it was routine, Andrea told herself. Her muscles must have not heard; they continued to tighten around her joints, preparing to fight or fly.

It wasn't until the doors slid open and buzzers sounded that she pinpointed the absence of arriving passengers as the sign she'd convinced herself was a paranoid projection. She still couldn't explain why the empty carriages were such bad omens, but she was sure the explanation would only reveal itself once it was too late. A schoolboy in bulky headphones shouldered past her to board the bus. He scrolled through a colorful timeline, no patience for the setbacks that came with living in a human body rather than a computer. Was he in a hurry because he had somewhere to be? Probably not, Andrea thought, at least not anywhere too important; cattle's cravings for autonomy catapult them towards the unknown. She understood, of course, a desperation for quick-fixes, simple answers. When a homeless man approached her, head bowed, tin mug gripped white-knuckle-tight, she gave him the coins in her jacket pocket. Color brightened his face so much he looked like she'd brought him back to life. Andrea quivered with rage; his joy had taken so little, hardly more than nothing at all, to awaken. She maneuvered towards the edge of the platform if only to protect the man from her scowl meant for someone with much more power than he'd ever have. Shame had hollowed out more than one important person in Andrea's life; relationships brought to an end because of some misconception that it was too late or vile to face. As a kid, the betrayals hurt more; her mother's episodes, father's addiction, then absence, completely baffled her, because nothing she knew yet could provide a

logical explanation. Sure, she heard about the drugs, but she wouldn't learn about the power of pride for years.

Business appeared to go back to usual as quickly as it got disrupted. No sense of relief flooded her system, though, and she felt like she was emerging from a deep sleep, not quite awake enough to tell the difference between dreams and reality. The red lights along the track blinked warnings: Ten seconds, nine seconds. . . She looked towards the windows for the lone boy or homeless man before leaving the station. Familiarity had become a fond memory, and Andrea clung to any feeling that reminded her of home. She'd come to learn it exists wherever you search for it. The doors began to shut, a manifestation of the opportunities she'd miss out on by staying behind. Any regrets vanished, though, as soon as the doors sealed.

A virgin white cloud in the train car appeared. It bloomed from within, trails furling over and around each other, and though she could not smell it, she imagined fireworks on the Fourth of July. Like gases do, it spread itself out to reach every corner of its sweet container. There went the train whistle. Its gears groaned to life, but before it could speed away, Andrea witnessed the cloud thicken into something like snow. She circled around on her heels to look for another bystander, but there were none, leaving Andrea to process the paralyzing beauty alone. Where was everyone? The empty car, the stagnancy of an entire crowd, a split-second decision with untold of consequences. Now, she was left to put the pieces together, except what were the pieces? Each line of thought she followed gave her a new scenario to reel over. While they each led to a unique outcome, they originated from the same hunch: whoever just boarded that train wasn't getting off. At least, not where they thought they would.

Andrea made her way above ground and squinted from the whiteness. It was a bright day; the sun illuminated the smog that hung as low as the lampposts some days. The cold air was

stagnant. It was only a few blocks to the outdoor market Andrea came to cherish. There was so much to notice. Sasha had made her promise to spend more time mindfully in the present. They had laid next to each other on Andrea's lofted bed, tipsy enough to think all of it was funny, playing therapists, being themselves.

“Let’s try, from now on, to not be like them,” Sasha said, staring at the poster of Prince on the ceiling.

“Like who?” Andrea asked.

“Everyone else. People who are distracted.” She paused and reached for Andrea’s hand, holding it lightly. “I want to experience things deeply, I want life to get under my skin, I want scars and stories and memories as rich as movies.”

“I want that, too.”

“Let’s start meditating.”

“Okay.”

Andrea took a deep breath, but the air felt thick in her lungs. She had decided to talk to Richard about the strange behavior and cloud of gas before anyone else. He always knew what to do. Until they started dating in college, Andrea had accepted her role as caretaker without much resistance, a pattern she’d noticed in her life, one she’d like to break. He showed her it was possible, which meant there was so, so much more to learn. This particular give and take, Andrea thought, was the heart of their relationship: Her attention to detail, his commitment to long-term goals. She finally felt secure and, for the first time, unafraid of abandonment. It didn’t matter much what happened now. She was guaranteed a livelihood. The thought of her grandparents finally able to rest now that their granddaughter was being taken care of satisfied the strongest desire within her. But since Richard wouldn’t walk through the front door of their duplex for a

few more hours, she intended to manage this anxiety herself. When she felt like this, uncertain, helpless, she practiced what Sasha taught her that night in the loft. It was easy to identify distinct sensations when there was so much happening in the market. She chose to focus on the artist painting intricate patterns on hand-carved masks. Andrea admired the bold reds and oranges and the painter's willingness to embrace such an energetic palette. The display of finished products was an explosion of warm colors, drawing a crowd despite the bite of winter. Babies in snow suits and fur-lined caps squealed at their parents for snacks or souvenirs, their snotty noses stressing the whine in their cries. Andrea felt sorry when the moms said no, so she bought a pastry to eat with coffee in honor of the children. She tasted fruit in each bite, butter between flaky layers of gold. It gets better, Andrea wanted to say to them. And she may have if Sasha had never taken her by the hand and stirred everything up. She couldn't help but cling to control as the key to happiness. The truth was, though, Andrea knew a lot less about life than she once thought she did. And after her visit to a train station out of *The Twilight Zone*, she no longer felt confident in her own mind. As her own parent, she had to pretend like she had figured it out if she wanted to survive. Look, she wanted to say, I made it. But these children didn't need advice from a woman whose definition of joy revolved around safety, so she held her tongue and onto the anticipation. There was still so much to learn.

Back at home with Richard, Andrea made baked chicken and sweet potato fries for dinner. They enjoyed each other's company and some red wine at the dining room table and left unwashed dishes in the sink. The more time that passed, the less Andrea felt able to explain what she had seen.

“I think I’m going to try and get some work done in the office.” Andrea said as they both changed into pajamas.

“Go get ‘em,” he said, happy as usual. Richard was so easy to love. They kissed and said goodnight, just one of the married couple rituals she would never tell Sasha about.

At her desk, she opened her laptop. The wallpaper was a starry Yosemite, a picture from Andrea and Richard’s honeymoon. They spent nearly a dozen days amongst Redwoods and the inhabitants of their forest, where birds and rodents seemed to follow them as if they’d entered a fairytale. They drove through the mountains, and they spent time at a peak, admiring its view. Andrea missed spotting constellations and shooting stars. The smog in South Korea made it impossible to stargaze.

She did intend to apply for a mediocre job or two for the rest of the night, but before she could buckle down and focus, she needed to indulge on any and every available report on the gas attack. Her phone failed to notify her of any breaking news all evening, and she’d yet to see any friends share the story on social media. She opened her internet browser and scrolled through a couple digital newspapers; no familiar headlines or images caught her eye. She Googled variations of “gas attack Seoul subway” and still found nothing. The absence of a tragedy, that she knew of, anyway, significantly lightened the load on her shoulders, and she sat up a little straighter as she considered the possibility of military involvement. The thought of getting swept up in any sort of investigation sounded her body’s internal alarms; her experience with authority was defined by a lack of protection. The cops who frequented her childhood homes didn’t care about solving problems or helping anyone, and she didn’t get it until she graduated high school and watched as eighteen-year-old boys who snapped her bra straps joined the police force. The only thing to do now, she thought, was wait.

Still, Andrea was drained after a day full of adrenaline. She managed to open a couple documents, though, and read her cover letter for at least the hundredth time. The words were empty to Andrea, but it was mechanically perfect, organized well. What it was missing, she could never identify, no matter how much time she gave herself between revisions. There's hardly any time left, she thought. She switched to her resume. It was clean, polished with the fine grain sandpaper of her own critical mind. It fit perfectly on the one page, too, so there was no room for additions. She saved them both without making any changes. She missed working under the light of the moon, blanketed in that comforting darkness, she thought. She could see so clearly.

Andrea stood near the corner of a well-groomed but boring park on base adjusting her helmet. It was bulky and uncomfortable. She wondered if she had enough time to think of a flake-worthy excuse, but she spotted the general's wife riding towards her. She was a large woman; not fat, although, Andrea thought, it would be okay if she *was* fat. Rather, she was built like the discus throwers Andrea used to compete alongside of in high school and college. As a pole vaulter, Andrea was small. She remembered the weightlessness that caused her stomach to flutter as she thrust herself in the air, putting all her faith, which wasn't much, in an eight-foot pole and firm mat. It was one of the only years Andrea could recall her mother in the stands, though her face is permanently red in all of these memories from the screaming and cheap beer. On the day Andrea slipped and fell mid-ascent, she was disqualified, and on the drive home, her mother refused to speak.

"Mom, it was an accident, please don't be mad," Andrea said, but her mother did not acknowledge it. "Please, mom, I'm sorry." A few minutes passed. A Celine Dion song started to

play on the radio, and her mother turned the volume up. “Are you *fucking* kidding me?” Andrea yelled above the music, slapping her palms against the dashboard. The minivan halted.

“Get out,” the mother said, still without looking anywhere near the daughter, whose mouth hung ajar like she just witnessed a crime of passion.

“I’m sorry.”

“Get,” the mother paused, “out.” The daughter didn't budge. “Get out, now!” The mother raised her voice in finality and laid on her horn for emphasis. This younger, vulnerable Andrea swung the car door open, stepped out, and was left behind, standing on the side of the road, the perfect victim.

The echoing ring of a bell pulled an older, courageous Andrea to the present. The general’s wife was approaching on a slim, red bike, her scarf floating behind her like the tail of a blimp.

“Andrea, it is just so nice to finally meet you,” the general’s wife said and held out her hand. “I’m honored to show you around Yongsan.” Andrea smiled without showing her teeth. They flipped up the kickstands and rode out of the park. They passed the movie theater and the Burger King, crossed train tracks, and struggled uphill. The general’s wife had much to say about the history of Yongsan, its architecture and accomplishments. Andrea was surprised at the woman’s ability to simultaneously talk with such gusto and ride with such purpose. Andrea, on the other hand, found it difficult to keep up; the smog had made its way to her chest cavity. It reminded her of the day in health class in middle school when they all had to walk up the stairs while breathing through straws to demonstrate what it was like to be a smoker.

The women on bikes waved at their neighbors playing tennis at the rec center. When they finally circled back around to the park, Andrea was relieved. The general’s wife gave her a hug

and Andrea used an artificially sweetened voice to say goodbye. She grabbed some spicy-smelling takeout on her walk home and couldn't wait to get home, so she could eat it on the couch while watching TV.

“Do you want to come to bed?” Richard asked.

“Soon,” she said, “I’ll just be on my computer for a little while longer.”

“Okay, I’ll save you a spot. On the left side, just how you like it.” Andrea thanked him for being thoughtful, and he shut the door behind him. She went back to scrolling through Facebook. It made her homesick.

“Home is within yourself, Andrea,” Sasha would tell her when they lived in the dorms. Andrea searched for Sasha’s profile and read her latest posts. She recently co-founded a nonprofit for battered women back in the States, a dream if you asked Andrea. Sasha’s newest pictures featured herself beaming next to a handful of other women, none nearly as beautiful as she was; that’s probably why she was always in the center, Andrea thought. There was one picture of Sasha cutting a ribbon in front of the entrance to a graffitied warehouse. Another picture showed Sasha shaking hands with an old man, another of her holding a giant check. She clicked through the album, and then through older, less professional pictures. She showed off her bikini body in a few of them and snow skiing abilities in others. Such range, Andrea thought. Thirty minutes passed. She only looked away from the screen when she saw some sort of hazy motion out of the corner of her eye. She swiveled in her chair and saw the polluted-looking cloud seeping in through the vent. It smelled faintly of chemicals. Her heartrate doubled. She ran to the bedroom where Richard was sleeping.

“Richard,” she called his name as she flipped on the lights and opened the closet door.

“Richard! Wake up!” She ripped open the box from the closet and took out the gas masks.

“What’s going on? Where’s my phone?” He was already out of bed and putting on jeans.

“Here, put this on, there’s no time,” she said, tossing him a mask. She was struggling to fit hers over her head.

“What the hell, Andrea, you have to tell me what’s happening,” Richard said, grabbing his work phone off the bedside table. He flipped it open. “I haven’t received any sort of emergency alert.” Exasperated, she led him to the office.

“Just put on your mask.” She opened the door.

“Why?” He asked as they stood in the doorway, looking into the small room. Everything appeared to be in order to Richard, except for his wife, who had put her mask on crooked. She could hardly see, so she peeled it away, afraid.

“But, just a minute ago, there was smoke,” she said, walking toward the vent, the hole in the seal, the access point. “Except it wasn’t *smoke*. But there was something, like an acidic cloud that wandered away from the sky and ended up in our house, like it was lost.” Richard pulled a flashlight from his desk drawer and peered into the abyss of the vent.

“I don’t know what it was you saw, but everything seems clear now,” he said. Andrea didn’t respond. “Do you want to come to bed now?”

“Okay.”

Under the heavy comforter, Richard held her closely until he fell back asleep, quickly and quietly. Andrea, though, was nervous about what sleep may bring for her. If she was having nightmares while she was awake, she was certain they would return in her sleep with even more darkness and drama. She freed herself from Richard’s embrace and grabbed her phone. With both

the brightness and sound turned almost all the way down, she opened the browser and searched for *interracial threesome*, where she found safety in pleasure.

Andrea attended the weekly get together with the housewives where they drank tea and discussed matters concerning women. They had chosen one that implemented music programs in American cities and were planning a festival with deep-fried candy and a petting zoo. Andrea had made no suggestions. Later, she took the train to the city, and shopped at the market. She could see her breath, but the sun warmed her skin. She ate barbecued pork on a stick before going home, where she fell asleep before the sun went down.

Again and again, she had meetings and tea parties and fulfilled commitments to exercise lightly with a different wife each week. She read books on the train and smiled at strangers. She bought fresh ingredients at the market and made homemade chicken fried steak and sat at the table. She unpacked the few remaining boxes. She had loving sex with her husband. In her sleep, the nightmares seemed to go into hibernation, and she had pleasant dreams. She settled in.

Andrea woke up on the day of the festival feeling content. She had been getting at least eight hours of sleep a night and had finally learned how to make homemade bulgogi. The sergeant major's wife, Jasmine, taught her how. They went to the rec center together, got pedicures where schools of fish dined on their dead skin, and were binging the same show. On her walk to the festival with Richard, Andrea felt grounded, and, for the first time, appreciated her community. She thought about how healthy it was for her to feel connections.

“Lieutenant Kelley, Mrs. Kelley, how are you?” A woman with dark hair and a polka dot dress who Andrea hardly recognized asked. Her pitch got higher when she got to “are” and added an extra syllable to the end of “you.”

“Gloria, nice to see you,” Richard answered as he went in for a one-armed hug. *How do I know this woman?* Andrea wondered.

“Good to see you!” She poked his chest with what Andrea thought was an intriguing amount of aggression. She had never seen Gloria at any of the meeting with the wives. “Andrea, I heard you put a lot of time into this fair! I have so been looking forward to seeing the ponies.”

“Thank you, well, that is just the power of music,” Andrea said. Gloria looked back at her, still smiling but not blinking.

“Don't be so humble! The kids have been talking about it for weeks. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Andrea?” Gloria lowered her voice like they were sharing secrets and covered her mouth with a hand.

“I'm sorry?”

“You know,” she nudged her, “still working on making that baby,” Gloria winked at Richard. Andrea scoffed, surprising herself.

“More like doing everything to avoid making that baby,” Andrea spoke flatly, looking over and around Gloria's head as if she saw someone who looked familiar in the distance. Both women's smiles were more performative than a cult leader's.

“Oh,” Gloria said and took a few steps backward. “Okay, so nice seeing you both. Enjoy the afternoon, it's supposed to be a clear sky overhead.” She waved at Richard and turned around.

“So, we know her from. . .”

“Being her neighbor,” Richard told her. “She lives to the right of us.” They kept walking towards the festival. Andrea had started to hear the echoes of music and laughter and announcements through speakers.

“That’s right. I never see her at the meetings.”

“With the officer’s wives?”

“You know the ones.”

“I think she works at the elementary school, so she’s probably busy during the day.”

They made their way to the gate and were marked with paper wristbands. Andrea always thought they felt so restrictive, like being handcuffed.

She was surrounded by joy at the festival. Live bands played, and the breeze kept cooling her off just as she was getting a little too warm from the sunshine. There was one ride: A Ferris wheel that lit up and rotated slowly. The sun started to set, and Andrea and Richard used their tickets to buy one go around. They ended their night hand in hand, sugared up and only slightly dizzy. It wasn’t until they got back home and had changed into their pajamas that Andrea realized why she had been miserable the entire day. With only the computer monitor lighting up the office, she attached her finalized cover letter and resume to an application for some sort of activities coordinator position, and then she went to bed.

Congratulations on everything! We should catch up soon. Love and miss you.

She only rewrote this text to Sasha four or five times before pressing send, unsure of whether Sasha would respond or not after being pushed away for so long. Then she exhaled before selecting the jogging playlist she made on New Year’s almost a year ago. Andrea could see her breath as she stretched at the base of mountainous hiking trail, air so cold it burned her

lungs. She tightened her laces and started to run. Soon, the wind numbed her face, and her legs felt long as she maneuvered over boulders and under branches. There were no more meetings for the next few months – “for the holiday season” as the wives said – and Andrea made plans while she ran. There were so many projects to tackle and ventures to embark on, she was peering out over so many horizons, the fruit was ready to be plucked.

She descended. Her music was interrupted by a dinging notification, but she didn't stop. It would have been stupid to slow down at all. She had built up all that traction. She was thankful for it, too, because she noticed the air start to thicken around her. Her feet began to drag, and she could hear her breath growing shallow and strained. By the time she made it to the bottom of the valley, the visibility was so low that she could no longer see the mountain she just climbed. It was almost dark, and her throat felt hot. Andrea wondered if Jasmine or Richard could come pick her up, so she didn't have to walk all the way to the train station. Before she could pull her phone out of her jacket pocket, Andrea began to cough and couldn't stop. She hadn't had a coughing fit like this since she had bronchitis as kid and was out of school for a whole week. Trying to catch her breath, she puts her hands behind her head, but there was not enough time in between each cough. The smog was closing in on her, inching towards her uvula, wringing it out like a dish rag her mother would drape over her shoulder on Thanksgiving, it was expanding like a balloon, blocking her windpipe, blocking the air.

Andrea fell on her hands and knees, itching her neck. She looked up and could see a plane flying very close to the ground, maybe three planes. Then she heard the screams of families, of babies, a man yelling what sounded like orders in Korean, something heavy crumbling. An unidentified person ran up to her, kicking gravel around, and stood over her. There was a gas mask covering their face. They said nothing.

She bolted upright and got in another gasp of air. The smog was getting denser; Andrea could no longer see the road. Or anything, except a block of greyness. She was no longer coughing, just suffocating in silence, her eyes wide. The panicked crowds must have dispersed, as she could no longer hear sounds of terror.

Andrea's phone dinged once more, somewhere deep in the smog, and it seemed like it would never stop dinging as it bounced back and forth from ear to ear.

The Apocalypse

I kept sinking deeper into the cat-hair-couch as the dishes piled up. They were everywhere. Fat worms explored my sink's own living world as flies launched themselves against the window, *anything for some fresh air*. I imagined them plotting over their beloved friend's corpse, floating in a glass of red wine. I could not contain the kitchen. The dishes piled up in all five rooms of the house. The coffee table was hidden beneath a sepia-toned map of crusty napkins and half-empty bowls of cereal, the milk no longer white. My desk was rendered useless; too many moldy mugs to get any work done. And I was lost in those cushions like a little boy at a birthday party coming to an end, panicking as the walls of a bouncy castle tumbled and trapped him under hot, heavy layers of neon rubber. The sun was relentless. But no matter how many fleece blankets I nailed to the wall, no matter how lifeless I felt, I still had to eat every couple of days, maybe some toast, or a granola bar, which was better because I didn't need a plate to eat a granola bar. And they didn't expire so fucking fast. The emptiness was unsustainable. I was covered in crumbs. The floor was crunchy. Better to stay put. Once all the dishes piled up, I couldn't bear to demolish the delicate universe in which I was God.

Arkansas Menagerie

Boy, did Aunt Lola scream like black tires peeling out of a lot when that damn dog dragged that dead possum through the back door. And when she saw it twitch and break away from the Lab's jaws, suddenly animated, she nearly fainted. Eyes rolled back, hand to the forehead, all of it, like she was some sort of pin-curved theater actress from the fifties. Uncle Roy caught her, of course, but not before throwing me the keys to his gun safe. The dog's bark was quaking, and the possum's little claws and pads skittered across the hardwood somewhere. I leapt with faith, stupidity, and a sense of responsibility down the stairs. Fumbling with the keys and lock, a thin, scaly rope whipped my calves, and I jumped straight up in the air, cartoon-style. The possum and the keys skidded out of view. "Fuck it," I said under my breath and grabbed the shovel that leaned against the concrete walls of the basement, veiled by lumpy cobwebs. Roy came stomping down the stairs, clearly not the hunting expert he claimed to be. He held a flashlight and dog carrier and looked at my shovel and then at me.

"What's your plan here, Lawson? To smash his skull and send brains flyin' all over my workspace?" He turned the light towards my face. I looked around and down the hallway, lit by the beams that shone beyond my body. "And where the fuck are the guns?"

"In the safe. The keys are down this hall-." The dog's angry bark echoing somewhere upstairs cut me off, and Roy took off after it, calling the dog's name, "Angus!" like some sort of Appalachian Marco Polo. Lola cried after her husband. I was left in the dark. I had to find the keys.

By the flame of my Bic lighter, I found the string hanging near the center of the unfinished room. When I pulled it, everything, the furniture and the rest of the junk, turned yellow. Some more running and swear words above my head. I dropped to all fours and crawled

down the hall, joining the brown recluses and dust bunnies. It worked; I found the ring with two small keys peeking out from beneath a metal shelf. It held a nail gun and a drill and a sledgehammer and power tools I had never needed to use before. I guess what Ma used to say about problems only getting bigger and bigger until you die is true. I could have used any of these against the feral possum—well, I guess there aren't any domesticated possums, who in their right mind would welcome such a pest into their home—but when an opportunity arose for Roy to shoot something, you bet he's going to fucking shoot. He's like that one rule we learned in high school English—the only class that taught me anything about the world or myself, really – where the gun must go off. You can't disappoint people like that. They yearn for those types of crises. So, I unlocked the safe and grabbed a shotgun.

Up in the kitchen, a pot of chili had been brought to a boil. I could smell our dinner burning, and as I ran up the stairs, hot tomato juice sputtered from beneath the lid, sizzled as it dripped into the flames. I turned the burner off. The barking and shrieks and commands and cursing had become background noise, but the world always persisted despite my inattention. I turned the safety off. The conflict had made its way to the bathroom, and I still don't know whose idea it was to lock all that wild in such a crowded space. And I don't know why I thought it was a good idea to join the animals, either: Angus, his ears pointed straight back, the hair on his spine stiff; the desperate possum crawling around like some sort of backwoods monkey; Uncle Roy doing a whole lot of talking; and Aunt Lola who thrashed like she was already infected with the rabies. But you would've thought I was an outlaw busting through the gates of a saloon the way I crossed that threshold chest first.

The shower rod had fallen, and Roy had the possum partially contained with the curtain. Lola gripped the dog's collar, but Angus was strong like my grandma's homemade moonshine.

His powerful lunge forward put my aunt right on her ass. And then it was a storm of bodies circling around me striking the tile floor, blurs of gnashing teeth, low growls, high-pitched calls for help, and the panicked squeals of prey begging for fresh air and blue sky. I was a statue, like the one at the park of the confederate soldier with a rifle resting on his shoulder.

"Lawson!" my uncle yelled with a red face, "why in the *hell* did you bring me the goddamn twelve gauge?" I looked down at the gun. He had a point. If I pumped its forearm and pulled the trigger, I'd blow a three-foot size hole in the wall. The fire-powered pellets would destroy everything in its path. I set the gun down on the counter.

And, boy, did Uncle Roy scream like a possum getting suffocated by a sheet of nylon fabric when that damn dog bit his calf. Tore a pretty good chunk of it straight off the bone like smoked ribs. And the possum saw its opportunity for escape and wriggled free, and I tried to tackle it, and Roy kicked his dog with the heel of his boot, I leapt through the air and grunted, Angus was stunned but was back up pushing his owner's chest with great, big paws, and I landed on a pile of laundry, and I didn't see it, but Roy must've fallen into the tub, 'cause it was loud and echoed, and then there was this look in Lola's face, one she hadn't worn before, not that I've seen, anyway, but Angus had Roy pinned, I think there was blood, and she was like a momma Grizzly sizing up a predator before the attack. Then, the gun went off.

For the Sake of Appearances

It is nearing the winter of 1927, and Eleanor and Tommy Richardson have a party to attend. Light from the vanity bulbs and a late November dusk bronzes Eleanor's skin. She admires her reflection in the mirror for a moment, but soon her thoughts take over like the gangs have this city, and Eleanor wonders if her reflection is the only thing she admires about herself, or anyone admires. Her husband watches, squeezes her exposed shoulders, kisses her neck. Illegal whiskey flavors his breath.

"I want some of that," Eleanor says.

"I want some of you," Tommy replies.

"Okay."

"Won't you be cold?" Tommy asks as Eleanor applies a final coat of lipstick and tucks it in her purse like a handgun. Though it's snowing outside, her legs are bare.

"The crowd and the drugs and the music should keep me warm," she says. "Besides, I don't mind the cold." Eleanor drapes a fur around her neck, though, and shivers as the couple walks down the stairs of their townhouse and slides into the backseat of a black car, entangled. The driver rolls up the partition. Tommy's kisses are drunk and hungry and envelop Eleanor's mouth like it's his last meal.

"Tommy," she says, sitting up straight and adjusting her slip. "It's too early to ruin my makeup." She had spent all evening getting ready. It usually goes like this: With the radio on, Eleanor will pull an armful of dresses out of her wardrobe and lay them side-by-side on the bed. Up until she married into old money, she'd never had options when it came to clothing, but she's always admired their opalescent beads and fringe and brilliant details. She'll try a few outfits on, complete with accessories, taking time between outfits to flirt with herself, and choose one she

knows her husband and his friends will like. Sometimes, she wears a hat that covers her face like she's a Russian spy or going to her dead sister's funeral. Sometimes, she pins her dark hair back to reveal sharp cheekbones and dangling earrings that make her neck look extra-long. Sometimes, she smudges black clay around her eyes like the prostitutes on the South Side. At parties and back-of-house lounges, people look at her and nod in approval. Ask to buy her a drink. She likes it. Maybe loves it.

The driver stops at a hotel glowing with Christmas lights. Tommy gives him a nice tip without exchanging any words. Eleanor keeps a poker face and sucks in her stomach. They follow the live horns and bass through the lobby and are stopped by an armed man guarding the entrance, a blood red and heavy curtain, like the kind at a theater. Eleanor can't hear anything over the sounds of people letting loose on the other side and starts sweating like she has stage fright. She reaches for Tommy's hand and is pulled through the velvet.

They emerge in nothing short of a ballroom. Through the low lights and haze of tobacco smoke, Eleanor sees every face in the audience turn towards her. She needs a drink, she says, and a glass of gin appears in her hand. Teardrop crystals hang from the chandeliers like they do from Eleanor's dress. There's a toast, and her gin is gone in one swallow, so she orders another. Some suits smoking cigars pull Tommy away – "this may be a party, but I'm still a salesman," says the shortest one with the fattest cigar – and Eleanor sits herself at the bar.

She's been an eavesdropper as long as she can remember, but the habit escalated once her father left them. There were so many whispers and looks too loaded for a kid who has yet to learn the alphabet to decipher. So, she had to be sneaky. The worst was when she heard her mother sobbing in between prayers, begging the Lord to die. Still, as Eleanor leans against the bar in the basement of L'hôtel sur le lac, she can't help but listen to private conversations. They

aren't full of plot twists or character deaths, but the tales paint pictures of lifestyles alien to her. It's true Tommy has spoiled her over the last five years, but he has also sheltered her. A man with a curled-up mustache speaks to another man with his back turned towards Eleanor. She swirls her cocktail.

Something about pressure and shipyards and a baby on the way. It sounds like a sad story. There are a lot of those in this tangled city that keeps growing like a vine; tragedies litter the ground like over-ripened tomatoes. But soon their effects will wear off, disintegrate and blow away with the dust, and the rest of the city keeps going with their heads up. Eleanor knows too well about shattered hope, like a fatal shooting at a shipyard and the baby that never comes. But before she gets sucked into her own sinkhole of memories, Eve taps her on the shoulder.

"There you are! How's your drink? Looks like you need another one." Eve clenches her jaw and fists, and her pupils are the size of pennies. "Can I please get another drink for my friend Eleanor? Thank you!"

"Perfect party, like always," Eleanor says and raises her glass. They clink and catch up. There is plenty to gossip about in Chicago – love triangles, under the table business deals, someone who knows someone who works for some mob boss, occasionally all the above.

"Who's that?" Eleanor asks. A glowing silhouette saunters onto the dance floor dressed in a floor-length gown. She is *glowing*, a hypnotic lantern. Men flock to her like flies. Her jewelry is reflective, and her skin is bright, but more than that, she has an aura of light around her, from her hair to her heels. The flies follow her as she twirls and slaps to the rhythm of the big band.

“Her name is Marguerite,” Eve says, “and she’s dating one of Frank’s employees. He met her on a business trip in Paris.” Eleanor’s not surprised the woman is foreign, but she is fascinated.

“How does she glow like that?”

“Well, she *did* tell me in confidence,” Eve says, “but we all deserve to glow, right?” She finishes her drink. “It’s this new French skin tonic. Made of some chemical or plant. An achievement in science.”

“Eve, can you get some?” Eleanor knows Eve can get anything she wants, but asking her will force her to prove it.

“I don’t see why not. Can you afford it?” Eve knows that Eleanor can afford anything he wants but asking her will make her uncomfortable and less beautiful. Eleanor winces.

“Tommy can afford it.” Eleanor slips a cigarette out of her purse. “Do you want a smoke?” Eve nods. Eleanor is still entranced by Marguerite and how she glows like fireflies in the country. She doesn’t notice Tommy until he’s close enough to touch. He snuffles, then smiles.

“Ladies,” he says and kisses Eleanor’s hand as if he’s a gentleman. “Should we dance now?”

“Sure.”

“Sure, I’ll go find Frank.” Eve says and disappears into the crowd. Tommy grabs Eleanor by her waist, so slim his fingers almost touch. He’s squeezing her tight, and her instincts tell her to push him away, so she does, and he does not appreciate that, he says, stoic. A waitress offers them shots. Though Eleanor declines, Tommy insists. They both take burning shots of something blue and tart.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “I know how to loosen you up.” By the wrist, he leads her to the dancefloor, where they’re surrounded by tall, thin women and handsy men. As the orchestra plays a ragtime jam, Tommy spins Eleanor around like a top and dips her. Swing came just as naturally as their synchronicity. The liquor sloshes around her limbs, and Eleanor can’t help but laugh as she spins around the floor. They circle around Frank and Eve and switch partners for a few beats. They’re drunk and happy. When the song fades, Eleanor tells Tommy she needs to use the ladies’ room and asks Eve to join her.

“I saw him grab you,” Eve says. She adjusts her pins and checks her teeth, and both of their gazes are locked on their own reflections.

“It was nothing.” Eleanor says, but her only friend laughs in disbelief. It’s brief, like a punch.

“Compared to how he usually treats you?” Eve can get like this when she mixes drugs and liquor – abrasive, uncompromising.

“Like your marriage is a fairytale?” Eleanor turns toward Eve, a lifelong socialite who eats about one hardboiled egg per day. Why couldn’t she just mind her own business? Why couldn’t she have stayed silent? Eleanor wonders. Eve is ignorant; she knows little of pain, of child deaths or thirst or insecurity. She knows little of loss, not like Eleanor, whose childhood memories are bloodstained and send her into hysterics.

“We all have our problems, Eleanor. But Frank doesn’t threaten my life.” Tommy has only scared her like that once. She had asked too many questions about their bank statements, and when her tone became, in his words, disrespectful, he cornered her.

“How can you be so ungrateful? Eleanor, I’ve given you more than you deserve.” He stroked her collarbone. “And I could take it all away, if I wanted.” The slap was over before she

knew what was happening. It was hot and sent pins and needles to her cheeks. Her lip began to quiver.

“Don’t you dare cry,” Tommy leaned in, “don’t you dare fucking cry.”

In the gold ornamented toilet room of L’hôtel sur le lac, Eleanor feels the marble floor solid beneath her. She closes her eyes and breathes, but this makes her head spin. Ever since her sister, Helen, died, it’s almost impossible for Eleanor to relax.

“Are you alright?” Eve asks, genuinely concerned for the first time all evening.

“Fine.” Eleanor checks her curls – as tight as ever – and gathers herself before leaving Eve behind. She’s had it with the cattiness and bathtub gin, she thinks, and scans the party, indifferent to Eleanor’s personal life. She’s ready to go home. Later, she’ll wonder how different her life would have been if she would have stayed home this night.

She sees her before she sees Tommy. Marguerite rests her head on his chest, listens and laughs. Tommy is soft yet overbearing like a feather boa; he’s wrapped around her, and his whispers tickle her ear behind a cupped hand.

“Do you want me to go over there for you?” Eve asks, suddenly behind her with a fresh drink. Eleanor finishes it and lights another cigarette before Tommy’s noticed them. He’s under the spell of Marguerite’s accent and fitted bodice.

“No, but will you come with me?” Eve leads the way.

“Thomas, hi,” Eve says, interrupting their conversation – Eleanor thinks she hears something about his trips to Europe for work and feels queasy. “You’re not easy to track down, are you?”

“That’s not such a bad thing is it, is it?” He says in his politician voice before his gaze lands on the woman who glows. “Not in my line of work, at least.”

“I see you’ve met my friend Marguerite,” Eve says.

“I’ve had the pleasure, yes.”

Eleanor interjects, “Marguerite, so lovely to meet you.” She sort of curtsies, then blushes. Marguerite’s perfume is sugar cookies, port, cypress, a crackling fire. “I have to say, I love your look. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That is so kind. We take care of our skin differently in France,” she says.

“It works. I’d love to try some, see how it reacts with my skin,” Eleanor tries to act rich, but she’s slurring her words. “It’s sensitive.”

Marguerite is deliberate as she reads the room and explicates the guests. She identifies the tension and targets it.

“Why should I share it with you – I do not even know you?” Eleanor takes a sudden and sharp inhale. “Is it because you want your husband to look at you the way he’s looked at me tonight? To treat you like an exotic princess, an Amazon queen?” Marguerite’s question and demeanor demand an answer. Eleanor musters a nod and feels like a small child. It doesn’t help that Marguerite is about half a foot taller than her.

“I’ll give your Jewish friend a small bottle,” she says. “Remember, a little goes a long way.”

On their ride home, Tommy and Eleanor fall into their routine of silence, and Eleanor knows not to ask any questions, so they don’t discuss what she had seen. Besides, why should she go looking for trouble when she’s found a solution? When she’s found the stuff, the fountain of youth, the blessed, blessed water?

The next day is bright and crisp. Eleanor postpones her plans for tennis and meets Eve for coffee instead.

“Marguerite left this for you.” Eve pulls a small gift bag out from beneath the table like a rabbit out of a magician’s hat. Inside is eight ounces of iridescent *eau di radium* and a note tucked between layers of pink wrapping paper, address to Eleanor.

For the ambience,

Marguerite

“How do I look?” She asks with her head held high. Eve twists her mouth to the side.

“I’m sure it takes a few applications,” Eve says. Eleanor isn’t glowing yet. She slips the bottle and note back inside the bag, finishes her espresso, and wonders why it feels like she’s doing something wrong. Eve hails a taxi, but Eleanor likes to walk home, especially in late autumn when the leaves are as red as the brick roads of her neighborhood. The stark differences between Lakeview and where she used to live on the South Side evoke a deep sadness that settles in Eleanor’s stomach like rocks. She wonders if her father would be proud of her for earning a diploma instead of wages. At least she knows her mother approves – perhaps not of all the partying, but was indulgence not better than hunger and the constant cold and seventy hours at some factory where profit trumped safety? Wasn’t it better than her sister’s demise? Her mother’s final wish was for her only surviving child to do more than just survive. Eleanor imagines her mother and Helen sitting on a cloud, watching her life as if it was a talkie, gasping at her more regrettable decisions and crying along with Eleanor every month she fails to conceive. She wonders if Helen’s clothes and hair are still charred, a trail of black smoke following her for eternity. They must be proud of her, Eleanor thinks. She’s alive.

Tommy is right, though – without him, she’d have no where to sleep except for in a sleeping bag in a room with six other people. She’d either be working for nothing, hunched over, fingertips rubbed raw, or waiting at the intersection for a rich man like Tommy to trade her five dollars for a night. She wouldn’t be beautiful or loved. As Eleanor considers these alternatives timelines, she thinks she’d rather join her family in heaven.

Eleanor doesn’t start shining until the near year. But once she does, everyone notices. On casual walks to bakeries, or as she reads on park benches, strangers approach her with praise:

“Excuse me, I just wanted to say, uh,” a man wearing a lot hat say, “you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, and I can’t take my eyes off you.”

“I’m dying to know. How do you do it?” asks a woman,

Others are less accepting:

“Unnatural. Some witchcraft if I’ve ever seen it.”

Most importantly, though, Tommy is enraptured. He makes dinner and bring home her favorite wine. For a while, he treats her like he did when they were dating, like a real woman, one who can have babies. But all these glories do not come without a price. Sometimes her presence startles clerks or doormen; they jerk like they’ve seen a ghost. Cold water bites her teeth, and one of her nails breaks as she turns a doorknob. The waste bin below her vanity fills with clumps of hair pulled out of brush bristles. And mood swings as bad as her late grandmother’s who told bedtime stories that sometimes ended in marriage and *happily ever after* and other times ended in children for dinner. Tommy never asks what’s wrong, and Eleanor never offers. She does wonder, though, if he’s even noticed.

She also can't help but speculate about Tommy and his new secretary. Despite her newfound glow, Eleanor still sucks in her breath when Judy answers the phone at his office, all sticky and sweet. And there was one time she caught him in a lie, had snaked into a conversation he hadn't meant for her to be a part of. He must have forgotten to mention Judy would be joining him on a business trip, he explained, and the only reason they stayed in the same room was because she was not yet eighteen and could not rent her own. Eleanor was not stupid, but she was scared.

On Valentine's Day, Eleanor wears something new and visits Tommy at work. Her glow is especially bright, and on her way there, she tries to remember how to be seductive but still coy. She summons Marguerite, thinks about closing the door and blinds to his office and sitting on his desk, uncrossing her legs, whispering his name. He would like that. In the lobby, Eleanor checks her reflection one more time in the pocket mirror from her mother. It's the only vaguely valuable possession Eleanor could remember her owning. Its case is pearl white and beveled and hangs from a silver chain. She had replaced the original nickel one. The brisk wind has blushed her cheeks and nose. Eleanor looks ready, like someone who, as a child, injured themselves often from jumping off bridges and throwing stones.

When the young receptionist sees Eleanor walk towards her in high heels and stockings, she freezes.

"Hi, Judy."

"Oh, hi, Mrs. Richardson, how are you? You look so – dreamy." Judy's posture is still, and she's blinking an awful lot.

"I'm just here to see Thomas."

“Apologies, Mrs. Richardson, but he’s with a client.”

“I can wait.” Eleanor takes a seat near an ashtray and lights a cigarette.

“He may be a while,” Judy perks up. Pressure fills Eleanor’s chest. She walks back over to the teenager.

“What’s the name of this client?” She tries to still her voice. “I don’t recall him mentioning any meetings this morning.” Not like he would, Eleanor thinks.

“Um, I’m sorry, I’ll have to check.” But before Judy can pretend to search through calendars and file folders, a different girl emerges from Tommy’s dark office. She’s stumbling a bit, but happy, especially when Tommy appears behind her and tells her something lovely Eleanor can’t hear. He’s reaching for her ass when he’s interrupted by the reality of his wife and vows exchanged not that long ago.

One day, Eleanor will look back on this day and think the worst part was her lack of courage to react, get angry, interrogate and humiliate. Instead, she’ll be reminded of her weakness, because all she could do was run away, sobbing and glowing all the way home, where she deadlocks the doors and refuses to let Tommy inside. He begs on his knees in the grass, screaming apologies and promises for hours. He offers her everything she wanted – a home full of warm food and babies, honesty, her own bank account. When the sky falls completely black, Eleanor meets him on the lawn and rocks him back and forth. She says something expected, like she loves him but isn’t sure if she can forgive him. He says something empty, like he needs one chance. For a while, Eleanor asks Tommy to sleep on the couch and no longer packs his lunch. She wipes down the counter, and as he spreads dressing, layers deli meat and swiss cheese on bread, Eleanor has a vision of her future, vivid and deep. For the first time, a future feels

possible, like she has one, and she wonders if that's what it means to be powerful. To not jump at sudden sounds or look over her shoulder when she washes dishes.

Later – about ten years later – Eleanor will wake up next to Tommy and feel especially sore. She'll worry about how much support her joints can provide as she walks down the stairs and into the kitchen. She'll brew tea, feed the cat, go about her morning ritual like normal, except slower and more careful.

“Good morning.” Tommy will say and stretch, shirtless under his robe. Their marriage has, of course, had its ups and downs, but it will have mostly improved from Eleanor's new practice of talking to her husband about trust issues and stomach aches, and his new practice of listening. He won't hit her again. He will have to restrain her a few times – Eleanor's mood swings will only get worse, but she will only get more frail. The paperboy will drive by, and the couple will wave through the window as he tosses the bundle of the *Chicago Daily News* into the dried-up flower bed.

“Morning,” she'll kiss his lips. “I'll pour you some tea if you run and get the newspaper.”

“What a deal,” he'll joke.

They'll be sitting across from the other enjoying the syrupy Sunday morning when Tommy mentions an article about some pandemic; people are dropping by the dozens, he'll say, and they're saying it's radium poisoning. Without warning, Eleanor will snatch the paper from Tommy's hand to see for herself. She knows that word – *radium*. She's read it again and again on small, glass bottles shipped overseas from Marguerite. Their secret to eternal sunshine. But the article will be full of decay, not beauty. She'll read stories about dead women with details so grotesque it will give her nightmares of unhinged jaws, lost digits, skin that flays at the slightest

touch. Too suddenly, Eleanor will stand up from the table, and her heart will race like it used to when Helen died. As a wave crashes over her, the coffee mug will fall from her hands and break into sharp, porcelain pieces, and dark water will seep into the newspaper, smudging the story until it's nothing but ink.

Ice Cold

Viktor fills a bucket with hot water and bleach, careful not to splash the spines of his prized novels. The works of Tolstoy and Tennyson insulate the Antarctic research station, but to Viktor, they serve a much greater purpose. Back in Soviet Russia, he was a sick boy; storytelling kept his mind busy during those long, bedridden months. Viktor starts to scrub the blood off the concrete floor where his research assistant lay dead. He should have known better than to give away the endings to Viktor's stories, especially in this isolated and frozen tundra where one can so easily go mad.

Tactile

Faith had been stung by a jellyfish once before. It was a whole ordeal; between the screams and splashes of all three sisters, her mother had thought someone was drowning. What a nightmare, to lose a child on a family vacation to Florida. But its tentacle had only left a rose-colored welt on Faith's foot that faded after a few days. This time, though, she was alone, and there was no evidence she had even been stung. But Faith had seen the jellyfish, she was sure of it, because it wasn't the kind she was used to seeing, long and stringy and only as clear as dish water. This one was memorable, royalty, rare. She vaguely remembered the lectures from her course on invertebrates, but when a photo of the Man o' War jellyfish had appeared on the projection screen in some concrete classroom at Iowa State, she'd perked up in her seat and started paying attention. She'd wrote its name in her notebook with gel pen: *Portuguese Man O' War*. And then, Faith had seen one wild in the Pacific, a work of art, blown glass. But it wasn't just its strange bubble of a body that she remembered from class that day; she had also written *venom strong enough to kill* in bold letters. After examining her wrist where the tentacles had curled itself around her like seaweed and applying some Neosporin, she figured it must have not stung her, or at least not completely; maybe the scratch she'd felt was the feeling of surprise. Maybe the jellyfish was old or sick. Faith looked out to the horizon. White caps in the distance were like brushstrokes against the blue. For the first time since she'd moved to Honolulu, she had a beach to herself. She slapped a waterproof Band-Aid on an absent mark and thought she'd be fine if she kept an eye on it. Curiosity replaced any discomfort; there was a chance for Faith to capture the creature on film, and she thought if there was one near the shore, there must be more close by. So, she pressed the power button on her action camera and plunged back into the sea.

At Powerplant Beach, a locals' favorite on Oahu, the current pushed against swimmers from a few directions as the plant pumped warm water out strong enough to break the surface. The temperature attracted land and sea creatures alike. Snorkels bobbed and dotted the view. The occasional shorebird swooped into the frame of Faith's camera for a second to catch its dinner. It hung from her wrist as she breaststroked, and the clumsy motion of her flippers spooked a shimmery fish.

Faith flipped over onto her back and pushed her goggles up, tangling her sun-bleached hair into a nest. Her grandma used to remind her to lay like a dead man if she was ever lost at sea.

"Treading water will you tire out quick," she'd warned.

The sky was cloudless, like another ocean above her. Faith was about 40 feet from shore, and water broke over rocks and a coral reef to her left. She shook out her goggles before taking a dive. Like a documentarian filming migration routes, Faith followed and recorded the flat yellow ones and little shrimps. From where she floated, limbs out like a starfish, she had a bird's eye view of the maze-like reef, a reminder of the mowed-down cornfields during Octobers in Iowa. It was easy to get scraped up out there.

Faith had practiced snorkeling in pools as to not accidentally kick a sponge or anemone when she first moved to the island, joining her sisters in paradise. It was almost impossible not to touch the coral; they reached out like helping hands and waved as she doggy paddled by. Her favorite biology professor, the one with a jolly laugh and good advice, explained how coral sting and trap small fish for meals, and even though they look like pretty rocks, they're actually more alive than oak trees. Tourists loved to snap off pieces for souvenirs as if they owned the bay,

destroying habitats in their wake. Faith was reaching the edge of the reef when she spotted the turtle. The water was so clear he appeared to be levitating.

She's loved them since her grandparents brought her home a stuffed turtle one year from their annual trip to Hawaii. They were probably why, Faith thought, she'd wanted to be a marine biologist – both her grandparents and the turtles. A faded Polaroid paperclipped to a postcard hung on their family's fridge as long as she lived at home. Her grandmother wore a pink lei with fresh flowers and nuts and stood on a lanai. Faith guessed her grandfather took the picture, and she looked so young, they must've been newlyweds. A hula girl sang welcome on the card. For Faith, the word *Hawaii* conjured these images. Comfort, love, beauty.

She took a deep breath and dove forward. It was the biggest turtle she'd caught on camera; its shell was big enough to catch a sky woman. As she maneuvered through the sea fans and urchins, she understood why someone would worship turtles. The Iroquois creation story was her favorite myth; so much more sensical than the one her preacher would spin on Sundays. It was easier for Faith to believe that the Earth emerged from a great body of water than out of the mouth of a god. But then she wondered if they could be the same thing. His eyes were tired but friendly like an old man's, and she was close enough to touch him, so she did. Her parents would have smacked her hand away, *look, but don't touch*, but they were in Iowa with the rest of her graduating class who couldn't find the courage to leave and only posted pictures of their pregnant bellies and garden beds. He didn't retract or notice her gaze at all, and she felt relieved and lingered until she could no longer hold her breath. When she bounced up from beneath the water like a buoy, she turned the camera towards her face and laughed a joyful laugh, like a praise.

Her swim back to the beach was leisurely, though the sky was darkening to indigo, and she had a date with a man she'd never met before,

“Be sure to make a good first impression,” her sister Brianna had reminded her earlier in the day. She had been the one to set Faith up with him, some rich executive who had a vacation home on the North Shore.

“Like, *rich* rich, Faith. Not some Khloe Kardashian bullshit. I mean oil-money-rich, passed through generations.” Brianna was painting her toes on her bed. She'd laid on her back and crossed her ankle over her bent knee. “I'm talking billionaires.”

“I can see your vagina,” Faith had said and threw a pillow in her sister's general direction. One of the many negatives of moving here: Sharing a room with Brianna. Madison was the only one who had a real job, she'd said, even though they all worked at the same place, but she always spotted them, so she shouldn't have to share a room.

“How do you think I meet so many men, smurf?” Brianna had thrown the pillow back. “Now, don't fuck up my polish.”

Faith toweled off and tossed her gear into her duffel. It was getting chilly and hard to see. She dug through her monogrammed purse for her keys, but after about thirty seconds, she dumped all its contents out in the sand. Her camera, phone, a few tampons, some change. But no keys.

“Shit.” Through the window of her hand-me-down Corolla, Faith could see her lanyard in the driver's seat. She double-checked all the doors and the trunk, but concluded she had, in fact, locked herself out of her car. How typical, she thought to herself and remembered the times her parents had to come rescue her from her own stupidity. She'd let the car run out of gas more than once, though the fuel gauge hardly worked anymore, she reminded herself, and had a few flat

tires she was too weak to replace. She wondered if she should cancel her date. She looked and felt like a mess. She mostly just wanted to get out of her wet swimsuit and lay down in front of the TV. But fancy food did sound good, and she didn't want to deal with a pissy Brianna later.

She figured calling Madison would be her best bet, but when she pressed the round button that fit perfectly under the thumb, the screen stayed dark and blank. She pressed its other buttons. Nothing. It took her a moment to realize her phone was dead. It took her a few more moments to realize she was stranded, alone, and another moment to realize the sun was setting. Soon the sky would be as dark as her phone screen.

Faith did a quick inventory of her stuff before putting it all back in her bag except for her camera. Should she start walking down the side of the road? There was almost no daylight left. She thought about all the cautionary tales she'd heard about hitchhiking. The beach wasn't anywhere close to her apartment – it would take all night to walk there. There was a neighborhood about a mile away, but she'd rather the murderers come for her than to walk willingly into the home of one. Besides, who would she call? The last phone number she'd memorized was her best friend's from the fifth grade. She needed to come up with a plan, but she'd always been taught to stay put. This is Oahu, for god's sakes, she thought. Someone should drive by soon. This was why she wasn't allowed to go anywhere alone until she graduated high school, she thought. Had she told anyone where she was going? She wasn't sure about that, either. The sun sank lower into the water. Faith was getting nervous, biting at her nails despite their saltiness. She could have let the panic overcome her, but she did what she knew how to do best and took a picture instead.

Poor Clifford, she thought. He was probably combing wisps of hair back and reciting mantras in the mirror. She couldn't help but make assumptions about his looks – his name was Clifford, and he was going on an old-fashioned blind date with a twenty-two-year-old. Plus, he knew Brianna. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about it all, but it was an excuse to go shopping at the open-air mall with her sisters. She tried on a few dresses before buying a coordinating mini skirt and off-the-shoulder top.

“Yes, bitch!” Brianna had hyped her up in the dressing room, both of them laughing as Faith twirled and struck poses. She knew she was a beautiful girl; strangers told her so every day. Some at her job cocktail waitressing at the Tiki Bar, some on the internet in the comments sections below her self-portraits. She had posted one in her new outfit the night before. Brianna had showed her the best spots on the beach and near the bar for pictures, where there wouldn't be any homeless people in the background. For this one, they'd chosen a candle-lit table with a view of the water. The Tiki Bar was part of a moderately-priced hotel chain; working there had its perks, even if tourists were the worst tippers. Faith was posing with one long leg extended in front of her and held her head in her hand. Brianna had taken it laying on her stomach to get the best angle. The flash from the camera had made her skin look tan and eyes bright as they looked intensely into the lens. Brianna had said not to smile, and of course, she listened.

“Some of our best work,” Brianna had said after they'd applied the last filter and posted the picture to Faith's profile. They captioned it with the martini glass emoji. Last Faith checked, it had more than 500 likes. Not great, she thought. Nowhere near Brenna's average. And it probably never would be; Faith didn't think she had the courage to do what some influencers like Faith did. Brianna could do it for a living if she wanted – at least for a while. Faith guessed she stuck around the Tiki Bar for her, and probably not to raise any questions with her parents. They

couldn't agree whether or not their parents were smart enough to notice Brianna's impressive but suspicious income, but it was better not to raise any flags. She had almost half a million followers, a closet full of a free clothes, and an agent who was sending her halfway around the world once a month or so.

"I wish I could afford to spend my entire summer in Europe," Madison complained one night. The three of them were getting drunk at work, and even though Madison was their boss, it was technically okay to drink on a slow night, she'd said as she passed her cigarette to Brianna, who had just gotten back from a vacation full of yachts, bikinis, and rose.

"You could if you want it bad enough," Brianna had said between puffs.

"I don't." Madison had said, but Faith wasn't so confident.

She wondered what time it was and wished Madison was here with her. She would have hatched a plan already, Faith thought, would have used a found fishhook on a line to unlock the door or something. She had been the one to show Faith Powerplant Beach and take her snorkeling in the first place. And the one to move all the way from Iowa to Hawaii for a job – the restaurant she managed was opening a new beach-side location in Honolulu, and they asked Madison to relocate and oversee its opening. She stuck around and eventually showed her sisters the ropes of island living. Faith found a patch of grass amid the rocks and sand and laid down on the bare ground. She didn't have to work like Madison until now. Her parents were older and more prepared when they had Faith, set with a college fund before she was born. They had encouraged Faith to volunteer, and they made a deal that as long as she kept dishing out scoops of cafeteria food at soup kitchens or reading books to old people at homes, they'd buy her a car and support her throughout college.

“We want to make sure you have plenty of time for your studies,” her dad has said.

“And I don’t want you to ever stress about food,” her mom added. But Faith wasn’t sure if that was true. She remembered the first time they had taken her to a homeless shelter. She had to have been only six.

“This is what poverty looks like, Faith,” they had warned. It looked sad and scary to kindergarten Faith – women with no teeth carried babies on their hips, old men refused to make eye contact with anyone. Was that the first time she felt shame? In her memories, their trips to the shelter were like trips to the September eleventh museum. Rather than watching a video of jumpers on loop, though, they watched people who never made sudden movements. She remembered them all to be hunched over and frail, dying a slow, drawn-out death.

“We want you to be grateful for what you have, everything we have given you, everything God has given you,” they said on the car ride home. She had wondered why God had given her so much more than the people at the shelter. She wondered it still sometimes. But she knew that wasn’t the response her parents were looking for.

“Thank you.”

But she lost her title of Best and Favorite Daughter when she moved to Oahu and started bartending with Brianna. At least Madison had a career, her parents had said, and Brianna had never been up to any good, sneaking out to party with boys. It’s not like Faith didn’t know what she was getting into, though; she’d envied her sisters’ profiles and timelines full of flowers and juicy pineapple for a few years, and there was no way she’d be the only one to stay in the Midwest. But the longer she lived out there in paradise among free spirits like her sisters, the longer she went without hearing back from any of the laboratories she sent carefully crafted

cover letters and resumes to, the more doubts and questions she had, like, why didn't they tell her it would be this hard?

The moon was big and bright. Faith laid on her back and thought about Clifford again, this time drinking alone. She wondered if her sisters noticed she was gone then remembered the first time Brianna told her she was sleeping with men for money. Rich, mostly foreign men. They had been lying on another beach, not too far away, celebrating Faith's high school graduation. Her parents had taken her to visit her sisters in Hawaii, but Brianna had snuck Faith shooters all week. They were both especially drunk the night Brianna asked to tell her a secret.

"So you're like, a prostitute?" Faith had asked

"It's not what you're thinking," Brianna said. "It's high class. Usually." She told stories about group orgies and penthouse suites in Dubai, dished details on other influencers who did the same thing. Faith had been in awe.

"Who did you think was on the other side of the cameras, babe?"

The beach was less than comfortable, but Faith was too tired to care. She fell asleep to the sound of crashing waves. And even though she would have sworn she put her camera back in her bag, the ocean crawled up the beach during the night and swallowed it. Or maybe it was a shorebird who'd carried it away to her nest somewhere. As soon as she woke up in the morning, she noticed it was missing from her shoddy campsite and was irritated. It was early but already hot, and her mouth was dry. Still no mark from her jellyfish encounter, though.

Her plan was to wait for someone to pull up and ask to borrow their phone. She walked down the beach for what seemed like the thousandth time, the pump from the plant groaning a familiar and hollow sound. But then she saw a disturbance in the sand ahead of her. She worried it was a family of crabs, but when she walked towards it, keeping a safe distance, she leaned in

curiously and squealed when she saw a batch of baby turtles hatching, emerging from the ground like they were born of it. Madison called it a “turtle boil” once, the way they looked like bubbles expanding and popping.

A man who looked like he also slept on the beach must have heard Faith’s outburst; he approached her with his arms raised, half waving, half surrendering, after he saw Faith’s furrowed brows.

Turtles hatching is all she said, pointing. The man got on his knees to get a closer look. They moved with purpose as they raced to the sea. Faith and the man followed them to the shore and watched them swim away. She’d learned in class about how predators would wait by the eggs until they hatched, but Faith didn’t see in feral dogs or big-beaked birds.

“They all made it,” the man said like he couldn’t believe it either.

The two strangers waded in the water. Although Faith was hungry and thirsty and a little sore, she was happy: There was a swelling in her chest like a foundation, and she took the deepest breath. The man next to her bent over and stretched and splashed water on his face. A bottle floated a few feet away from him.

“Is this yours?” he asked. She grabbed and uncorked it as if she knew it was. When she turned it upside-down, a small key with the Toyota logo she always thought looked like a bull on its black cover fell into her palm. She must have flipped it around a dozen times to examine it from every angle, and she was sure the key would vanish the moment she moved her eyes away. Still, she looked up to thank the stranger and offer him something in return, a ride or a bite to eat.

He must have had other plans, though, because he was gone before she had the chance to repay him. She was too late. While she was relieved, of course, to gain back a little control over her life, the disappointment in the wake of the man’s departure was stronger. But there was

nothing left to do except clean up after herself and leave no trace. As she gathered her belongings, she wished out loud that it was the man with the magic bottle who'd end up with her camera. The photos on its memory card were the only proof she'd ever been stranded, and as soon as the thought crossed her mind, Faith expressed a newfound gratitude and thanked whoever was listening. She finally had a story that was all hers, one that she would never tell. The key turned twice in the door handle as it should, raising the locks as Jesus did the dead. Faith, still in disbelief, looked out across the sea and into the horizon. No picture she took could ever do the ocean justice. But for the first time since spring, Faith felt worthy of the view.

NONFICTION

To Be Earth-Like

The etymology of “geode” is disappointing. Nothing about their crystalline interior sparked inspiration in its naming? No, look at the outside: it’s just a rock.

Geode, from Greek geodes “earthy, earth-like, with deep soil,” from gē “earth” + -oides, adjective suffix, “characterized by.”

It might be appropriate to describe me as earthy. I’ve met the earth many times, laid with it and admired its stability. I’ve played with the earth as a child with deep dimples and a desire for freedom. The earth has caught me as I fell on my knees, and I thanked it by pulling out fistfuls of grass (better than hair). I’ve made snow angels, I’ve landed in a bush after being thrown off a horse. I’ve had earth pressed into my palms, contouring their lines after a hot day of yard work.

But I could never claim to be earth-like, because to be earth-like, you must be the home to billions of souls. And I have only been the home to one. Maybe two, depending on your religion. But not billions. No, I don’t believe my cells have souls of their own. If I did believe that, it would make the molar pregnancy much harder to heal from. If the cluster of cells that attached itself to my uterine wall was soulful, which you might say is true if you were raised in a family of Jains or Southern Baptists, then I’m not sure how I’d be able to function after the miscarriage. But there was never a soul there. It was just an error, a different type of miscarriage. There was never a fetus to mourn. The egg was empty.

This series of events might have been characterized by the earth, though. The results of the test seemed to shift tectonic plates, causing a wave to crash over everything I had worked so

hard to build. The first weeks felt like being lost at sea on a dinghy. The ultrasound image projected on the TV screen was grey and cloudy like the sky on a stormy weekday. There was no thunder, though, no heartbeat to be detected. The procedure days later might as well have been an alien abduction – probed with no memory of it, the explanations sounded foreign, and worst of all, no one would believe me. I guess that would be better characterized by the extraterrestrial.

It's like the Mother's experience in Lorrie Moore's "People Like That Are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk:" "The Radiologist stops, freezes one of the many swirls of oceanic gray, and clicks repeatedly, a single moment within the long, cavernous weather map that is the Baby's insides." The ultrasound machine operating as a submarine exploring the ocean floor, the image as a Doppler Radar map in black and white. The news is unbearable. Must disconnect from the harsh reality of it. Or maybe mine is the opposite of the Mother's. The main difference is that I never had a baby and thank God for that. The gut punch of, *I'm sorry, I can't seem to find a heartbeat*, is nothing next to, *I'm sorry, the Baby has a tumor*. Crack open the rock to find a geode, or crack open a rock to find more rock.

Babies: A Lyric Essay for my Uncle

You, the youngest of three boys, raised
on healthy after-school snacks and *Scooby Doo*,
my grandma's baby.

Me, the oldest grandchild, the first Fisher-born
girl since Edna in the 1920s. My parents
chose to keep it a surprise, and when the doctor guided
my pink body into this oxygenated world, the space
between my legs contained the winning numbers
to the jackpot in your mother's heart.

In my earliest memory, I am a preschooler with pigtails
stealing the show at my baby brother's first birthday.

More peasants, peas! My mother loves to coo
as if it was a precious moment and not a sign of my demanding
personality. You were a kid then, too, an eighteen-year-old
with a freshly printed diploma and uncertain future.

Your wrist: shattered. The scholarships: voided.

There are pictures of you all sweaty in your pads and helmet
holding me in a mini Pirates cheerleading uniform.

I remember shaking a cow bell from the bleachers
and my grandma driving me home in her convertible.

They said you were going places with an arm
like that. When its bones were broken, did you wonder
if any of it was still true? Were you still going places,
with an arm like *that*?

At the party, my dad, the oldest brother, prematurely split
the hard cast in two with a pair of kitchen shears.

When the semester started in the fall,
did you feel abandoned?
Did you go looking for something
to fill the baseball-sized hole
in your chest, or did it find you, cowered in the bottom bunk,
writing letters home – the same way you did at summer camp
before she came and took you home?

Did you ask your brother why
he was only there for you to play catch
or get into trouble with and not when your only
source of satisfaction could be prescribed?
Why he was so willing to rip the bandage off
but repulsed by the infection?

Both your parents and mine believe in the powers
of prayer and sobriety. But we know
that's not how it works, and you bought thirty or so
little blue pills from my ADD-boyfriend
a few weeks ago.

Why did you avoid my gaze and only talk to Ben
that day you came to my house with fifty dollars
and left with a plastic baggie full of Focalin? And why
did you call me a *bitch* on fourth of July last summer? It's like
when I go with Ben to get my car fixed
and the mechanics ask him, *how can we help you today,*
sir? And it's almost like my stick-straight posture
and serious expression are signals of hostility and not purpose.

It's not our faults we were raised by a family
where identities are defined by difference, and I was only a child
when *fat* and *lazy* and *addict* were the words tossed
around when an acquaintance asked my father, *how's Matt doing?*
You gifted me a pack of bracelets when I was still a dancer
because you thought I didn't like you. But I never knew you,
and you never knew me, and now I've blocked you

on Facebook, so we may never get the chance.

July 19, 2018

There are seven or eight categories of phenomena in the world that are worth talking about, and one of them is the weather.

– Annie Dillard

A flashing arrow over a lit-up sign, a colored flag, hanging limp save for the promise of a breeze every now and then, and the word “HOOTONTOWN” stenciled in red, block letters on the side of the “STORE” (also stenciled in block letters, though in blue), that faces the road announces our arrival. We take a left into a gravel parking lot. Disturbed ground tornadoes outside the window, coating patches of grass in a layer of dust when it floats back down. We unload ourselves and our gear (SPF, meat and cheese sandwiches, a Bluetooth speaker, joints, beach towels, alcohol, wide-brimmed hats, more alcohol, etc.). It’s around ten in the morning, and the six of us are already sweating under our swimsuits. There are a lot of trucks and minivans and families, and the sun has opened up above us like an invitation. Out here, where you’ll find yourself if you follow the curvy roads in the heart of the Bible Belt that snake in and out of the Mark Twain National Forest and small towns named after God’s creations like Crane and Galena, there’s no cell phone reception. I miss a call about my grandpa’s test results. (Luckily, the news is good; no Alzheimer’s, but still no answers.) Even if I had thought to check, the weather app’s connection would be lost in the untrimmed trees that sprout vines as if they have adapted to their new technological predators by suffocating the telephones poles and wires. A dozen or so outbuildings surround us – wooden shacks, campers, RVs, sheds, mobile homes, covered patios, carports, garages. I can hear two blonde ladies chatting, both of their voices informed by years’ worth of cigarettes, a country song that echoes off the metal roofs of the concession stand and storage lockers, men tossing canoes onto trailers. Nothing about

Hootentown (with an “e” according to the website and the address, an “o” according to the hand-painted sign and locals) is uniform except for its dinginess. Still, the river rushing down the hill, the fruitiness of this beer, and my friend, Bridgette, naming the birds after hearing their songs – a belton kingfisher, tufted titmouse – adds color to the morning.

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*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

– *Mary Oliver*

There’s no need to paddle, and the crane seems to be our guide, waiting for us at the shore before flying away again, under the branches. I break the surface of the James River with my toes and dunk my sun hat when it gets too hot. And we always take our time when we float, pulling up to a gravel bar every half mile or so to swim and eat. Our first stop is across from a cabin with a private dock and friendly mutts who paddle across to greet us. We give them pieces of cheese and bread and scratches behind their ears. At another stop, we take turns riding down a strong current shaped by a fallen tree. I float on my back and am carried downstream, and it spits me out in a foamy whirlpool. We stop to play monkey in the middle; I’m consistently the one in the middle, struggling to get my hands on the ball, throwing my body against the water, switching techniques, trying to outsmart everyone. It turns into a wrestling match, either I tackle Ben, my boyfriend, or he tackles me, and my nose is burning from inhaling too early, my bikini

is giving way to hands with determined grips, but I'm laughing, and so are all my friends. I think I eventually secured the ball.

But today, we have a reason to rush. Half of us had rented kayaks for the trip, and they have to be returned by five. Unlike many Missourians, I'm not sure if I can chalk this potentially lifesaving circumstance up to anything. Luck, maybe. I've stopped myself from thinking too much about the *why*. As I research the details of the accident for this articulation, I watch videos of adolescents saved by strong-willed men struggling to respond to reporters' questions about fate and consequences and happiness. I would have crumbled in front of the television cameras then and there, unable to process what it means for everything to happen for a reason. Doesn't that go against everything science has to offer? Sometimes I have to close the tab. Interrogations lead to torture when you don't know the answers. And I don't. All I know is that since there's no time for another stop – the temperature is dropping, the sun lowering – we'll reach safety with a handful of minutes to spare, and I'll write an essay as a tribute to those less fortunate. Or, as a way to relieve the pressure of wasting precious time on earth, this opportunity to continue living when the dirty water could have claimed my body. We paddle straight into the heat for the last half mile, a few of us lagging and wishing we could jump in one more time, like fools.

It's generally true that the worst part of good days and fulfilling activities is when they end. But the last hour of any float trip is especially brutal, because someone is always too fucked up to function, and the dehydration starts to settle in behind your eyes as a headache, and kayaks weigh, like, 50 pounds, so lugging them up boat ramps can be a struggle for listless stoners like me. Usually two people have to drive all the way to the launch site to get the other car, then turn around and come back to pull-out spot. Which is the case today.

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*I go down to the shore in the morning
and depending on the hour the waves
are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, oh, I am miserable,
what shall —
what should I do? And the sea says
in its lovely voice:
Excuse me, I have work to do.*

– Mary Oliver

I sit in my stickered kayak with my knees pulled up to my chest and my towel wrapped around my shoulders, my hair darkened by the water that drips down my back. Unexpected clouds sneak up from behind a wall of cliffs and greenery. Ben and I wait for our friends to return with the cars. The exhaustion that comes with a day of swimming and sun burns settles in (and what is taking them so long, and it is getting dark a little early, isn't it? Because of the clouds, that's right). It starts to sprinkle. I join him beneath a leafy canopy and rest my head against his arm, shivering. He smells like bug spray. The breeze that entered the day like a secret was beginning to raise its voice. I hope the kayak we pile to the top of our Bridgette's car will withhold the strain. I see a loose tube barrel away from its stack in the distance. (Once, on my family's first vacation to Florida, my brother lost his tube to the Atlantic, and no matter how fast or far my dad swam to catch it, he couldn't win against the strength of the ocean. He would never swim a mile for me, I think, just like no one is chasing after this runaway tube that probably smells like mildew or has a leak.) A pebble in my cheap water shoe digs into my sole. The old school buses here along the shore of the campground look especially dangerous as the

overcast sky dimmed their undeniable yellowness. The revving of an unfamiliar engine, the waiting, and soft, soft sounds of thunder in the distance has Ben on high-alert. Suddenly, this isn't fun anymore. I wonder how I can be so close to a high school and a Wal-Mart and still feel this isolated. I wonder how anyone survived before cell phones and GPS. I wonder if my friends and I are going to be safe or not.

But they come back after an hour or so, and the raindrops are still falling slowly like ghosts. Despite our gelatin limbs, we load our damp gear and plastic boats into the truck bed and onto the SUV with more urgency than we had earlier this morning. But it feels like it's been days since we met to carpool and smoked a bowl in my backyard, basking in the precious seconds of summer. My lime green, sit-on-top kayak is the longest and the heaviest, so it lays on top of Ben's. Trials of different ways to secure them with different types of straps have led to our specific method of arranging and tying and cranking. (We'll never forget when the job wasn't done quite right, and the kayaks caught the highway wind like sails before breaking away and skidding across the blacktop and into the ditch. It could be a miracle that nobody got hurt if you believe in those.) When they're finally too tight to budge, we lift our tired selves up before sinking into bucket seats and stretching out across a bench in the back. It's after six o'clock when we pull out of Hootentown, Ben and I following Bridgette and the rest in her car. I'm in charge of warning them if her kayak loses its stability. We take a right onto Highway M. And as if the gates of a dam burst at its seams, as if a curtain of water falls before a stage we're driving on, as if we cross into a parallel universe where humans take their oxygen with two shots of hydrogen, the rain pours down.

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Stone County Sheriff's Office

July 20, 2018 ·

Press release

On 07-19-18, at approximately 7:09 p.m. The first 911 call came in reporting a “Duck” tour boat had sank near the Branson Belle in Stone County, MO. It was reported that people were in the water.

Stone County Sheriff’s Office, Taney County Sheriff’s Office, the MO Highway Patrol, Branson Police Department, Western Taney County Fire, Southern Stone Fire, TCAD ambulances and Stone County Emergency Management responded to the scene.

There was 29 passengers and 2 crew members on the Duck. At this time, 11 people are confirmed fatalities. 14 survived and 6 are still missing.

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The wind is worse than the rain. We cautiously drive through the outskirts of Nixa, the hail knocking against the glass like angry cops with batons. Ben and I acknowledge that if Bridgette’s kayak gets blown away, it’s heading right towards us. We keep as safe a distance as we can without losing sight of our friends. (The windshield wipers on this Ford Ranger are useless.) The storm propels walking sticks against our windshields and bumpers, flings debris across the road and sky ahead of us. It’s nine miles to the first place that’s safe to stop at – a Casey’s General Store – but it doesn’t take that long for my phone to reach its signal. I read about 75 miles-per-hour winds and a severe thunderstorm warning for a few counties in Southwest Missouri, including Greene – where we are – and Taney, and when I look at the Doppler radar, we are right in the middle of it, right in the red.

Luckily, it's moving fast. We make it to the gas station with our various vehicles still intact and wait for it to pass. I have goosebumps from sitting in a wet swimsuit and can't help but close my eyes for a minute. I think of a shower, a nap, fresh laundry, all waiting for me. Bridgette taps on my window, holding her wide-brimmed fishing hat against her head as it flaps in the wind. I roll the window down, and she says something like, *I'm going to use the bathroom, and then we'll be ready to go?* The weather has calmed, though not completely. We say yes and check the straps on our kayaks one more time. I scroll through Facebook while we wait in the truck with the heat on, trying to get dry, thankful for 4G LTE. The first article I see about the duck boat accident was from a local news station – Ky3 or Springfield Newsleader, maybe – shared by an acquaintance from my hometown. I grew up in the Branson area, went to school in Reeds Spring. The towns are connected through the tourism industry, specifically through Table Rock Lake, which flows through the Ozarks down to Northern Arkansas. I spent a lot of time riding in golf carts to boat docks and cliffs and tanning on pontoons and partying during winters at empty lake houses. For five summers, starting when I was fourteen-years-old, I worked as a dock hand at Rock Lane Marina. (For the most part, I was the only girl who worked there. The boss made me a custom t-shirt that read “sea kitten” on the back. The boys' shirts read “sea dogs.”) I learned about river rats and lake bums, how they drink rum and Cokes like water and aren't ashamed to flirt with a high schooler. We worked for tips. I made a lot of money. Sometimes, when customers got too rowdy, I was sent to detail a speed boat or hose goose shit off the sidewalks.

We used to see the Showboat Branson Belle from the marina, flamboyant with its red paddle wheels and two columns in the front. Later in the news I'll see some of its employees and even a tourist or two had jumped off, trying to pull people out of the choppy water after the Boat

Duck's roof disappeared below the surface. Others chose to stay dry and watch. One woman caught the whole thing going under on camera, but I wouldn't see the low-quality cell phone footage until later in the night. Once it goes viral, though, I'll find that it's almost impossible to get away from. The still image of the canopied amphibious vehicle, white-top wake up to its windows and overcoming its nose, will pop up on my screen every time I scroll through Facebook for the next month or so. The boat seems to bob in slow motion. Those of us left to wonder in awe pointlessly beg to know about the lifejackets. *Were there any on the boat? Did the captain ask the tourists to secure the fluorescent orange around their waists? Why didn't the vests keep them afloat?* I didn't have to go searching to find the answers; any new information about the accident would be published every day for at least a month. And the answers are what manifest my nightmares into ghosts. A defense attorney for the victims of a *different* duck boat accident said, "people get trapped in the canopy, the life jackets force them up, but the canopy pulls them down. It's a Hobson's choice." Visions of mothers and babies and the elderly getting sucked deep into the lake's depths along with the boat, their cheeks and palms pressed against the windows, kicking and choking, trying to escape the metal sea monster, choosing between what is available and nothing at all, will regularly flash in my mind. This moment was captured and will be shared endlessly.

The article cites unofficial reports of a fatal boat accident on Table Rock Lake. We are about to leave Casey's and head back to the comfort of our homes when I ask everyone if they've heard about it yet. *No, are you serious? Six confirmed fatalities?* And that number just kept rising and rising. Eleven, then fourteen, and finally seventeen total deaths. There were only 31 aboard. I'll see another article that quotes one of the survivor's mothers. She believes her daughter had been rescued for a reason, that God Himself had reached down through the storm to

save the chosen few, the ones who deserved it. Her daughter is special, and she knows this because it's all part of God's plan, and all the locals in the comments section agree. Everything happens for a reason, even the deaths of a grandmother and her granddaughter, of a pair of married couples from the Midwest, of a father and his son, of Bob Williams, the boat's driver, and of a husband, three children, a sister, an uncle, a nephew, and the in-laws, all on the same evening, because of an accident that could have been avoided.

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When the totality of the situation hit her, she told God, "if they don't make it, Lord, take me, too, there's no reason for me to be here." Asked whether she was happy to be alive, she told a reporter, "I don't know yet, time will tell." She added: "The only thing I can think of is that God must have something for me. There's no way I should be here."

– Christal Hayes, USA TODAY

Nine victims of the accident belong to the same family. The Colemans had traveled from Indiana to Branson for a vacation that was cut short by tragedy. Only Tia and one of her teenaged nephews will return home to bury their loved ones. It won't take long for the news to break that Tia is filing a \$100 million lawsuit on behalf of the victims, and it won't take long for Internet trolls and middle-aged white women to question her motives and her character below clickbait headlines. As if all the money in the world could replace the hole left in Tia's heart from the loss of her children, her husband – the people she held tightest against her chest and prayed for the most. I'll want to do is stoop to their levels, write bitchy but compelling responses to these strangers who believe they are holier than thou. I'll want to ask them what's the right way to grieve, and what will it take for them to empathize with a black woman in pain. But I bite my tongue and don't.



The purpose of a hashtag is to go viral, to bring attention to a particular issue, to raise awareness about something, etc. A hashtag is meant to be seen. It's a marketing tool. It's a way to brand an event or a concept. And #TableRockStrong provided space on multiple platforms for arbitrary bouts of finger-pointing, which makes sense; we believe that if we can understand something, we will suffer less, and if we can punish someone or *something* for these otherwise meaningless deaths, there's potential for closure, for peace. This misconception is one I've held tight to throughout this process. Anything to avoid the suffering. But if *surviving* – not only this deadly flash thunderstorm, but my childhood, sexual harassment, being a woman in Trump's America – has taught me anything, it's that suffering is worthwhile. After all, it's the only thing that all humans have in common. And if we can be honest in our suffering, if we can open up and listen and remain flexible, maybe we can connect. Maybe down-home, farmer's-tanned, Old Testament Midwesterners could finally understand a perspective outside their own. Maybe these deaths would matter a little more. Maybe this essay would feel more urgent. There are too many lives lost to unexplainable senselessness for us to dwell on one for much time at all, though. I know this very well.

But how can you blame the driver when he, too, fell prey to the water that Thursday; how can you blame the passengers for not thinking to check for pop-up storms on a day that had been so lovely; how can you blame the weather.

Instead, some will choose to blame it on the company (or the entire duck boat industry itself), but most will give credit to a higher power. Like the survivor's mother, like Tia Coleman, the people who live in heart of this country and grew up going to church three times a week and work hard and abuse drugs and cheat on their wives and float down rivers – people around here –

will justify the senselessness of the Branson duck boat accident by racking it up to God's plan. And even though their *thoughts and prayers* will get under my skin like splinters for the next few months, I envy them. I envy their faith in divine intervention. Because if I were able to believe, then maybe I would be able to feel as warm as I did on the day of July nineteenth, 2019 every day, before we survived by their skins of our teeth.

POETRY

Ode to Weeds

My parents corrected me after I pointed to a purple-y plant, with buds and fuzzy stems, and spoke of flowers and beauty. I remember furling my yet un-plucked brows after being told *it's just a weed*, and weeds are ugly, innately unwanted. Creeping Charlies only grow in poor soil, so they were all over the backyard where I played and bunnies chewed, wide-eyed, before running for cover into the woods; the weeds bloomed in the spring like live, wild bears awakening from hibernation next to the bare-bones-swingset whose legs would catch air if we swung too high. I collected bouquets of mint leaves and small onion bulbs for shelved mason jars. Beautyberries stained our fingers pink, a dye fit for a witch's hutch or a child's game. It would paint the perfect sunset. I remember being warned against eating them – though they looked like they belonged in a pie, rich and syrupy, they were poison, and we must destroy them before they overcome the forest. My father has always been heavy handed with the weed-killer and complaints about blue crabgrass. A lucky clover didn't stand a chance. To this day, I still kick dandelions, watch their parachutes float across patchy baseball fields and dog parks. I admire their adaptations to my father's inclination to control. The berries were safe to eat all along. My brother takes dandelion root with his dessert to soothe his stomach, my mother kneels in the garden yanking fistfuls of yellow from the bed, tears dripping off her nose, softening the earth, as she, too, remembers first being told that nobody could ever love a weed, *it's just a weed*.

Pseudoscience

/ red square blue square blue circle red circle blue square blue circle red circle red circle / click /
tornado in a body / we're not in Kansas anymore / red circle / click / sorry in advance for the
squeaky seat / blue circle blue square blue square / click / a room within a room for children / I ask
to play in the plastic kitchen with a full pantry / red square blue square red circle red square red
square / click / my mouth is cotton around the word square, skware, s k w a y e r / red square /
shit / click / I used to write my letters backward and cheat on the eye exam / blue circle blue square
blue circle blue circle / click / I've always wanted answers /

Crossroads, A Heatwave

After Kathy Goodkin

Over text, I'm colder than the waiting
room. I walk downtown and dodge
businessmen, all while carrying your regret

through the heat. A barista asks
me a question but I'm too busy thinking
of the past. Do you want me to list

my traumas for you? Yet,
you're in the hospital and I'm taking care
of the bills. You say the places you live

leave their marks. You call this one
the *wild west* and point out its woes
like I didn't grow up one of them,

a gas station apartment baby. I leave a tip
and hail a taxi, but cannot decide to leave
for the gold rush or a place to rest.

Columbine

I watch
as it unfolds:

Petals welcome
hummingbirds
and they drink from its perennial
pool, a fountain of youth.

The seeds of Columbine
flowers
spread themselves. A tornado
of germs travels outside
our mountain-bound community,
through the valleys and river rapids.

My neighbors knocks
on my door and mentions her nightmares,
how the unfettered flowers whisper warnings
into reality,
and that's how she knew to keep her children
home that day.

I imagine her watching the news
as a busty blonde spins stories
about the Trench Coat Mafia,
casting spells to protect their families –

Walk up, not out,

but if the mountains cannot stop them,
than how can I? Does she believe
in miracles?

But before I can ask, she thanks God
for the softness of flowers
in a world of steel-toed boots.

Big Tree

The best way to take its picture is to lay on your stomach
and look up,
so you can see all its limbs reach
out, an unspoken expansion,
much different from the way my grandmother
talks about her own mother,
and how life can be taken
like a rug pulled out from under your feet,
or like my wallet and social security card by desperate
strangers. But

I want to hear about all the ways I can grow
like Big Tree,
an outlier in a Midwest college town
otherwise known for its institutional racism.
Not even the professors know how the tree has survived
all these years, some 350, not to mention
all the lightning strikes
and flooding.

Every freshman visits the site, unprotected
and unmarked, mostly because it's the first time
in eighteen years where they can do whatever
and go wherever
they want, and it really is in the middle of nowhere,
outside the city limits,
so students can sit on its protruding roots
and pass the blunt, the bottle, et cetera.
*If the tree can pull through every iced
winter since 1660 without a caretaker,
then so can we.*

My first real boyfriend, the original rulebreaker,
drove us there and was pleased to be the first
to show me just how tall and wide an Oak can get,
proud of the tree as if he propagated it himself.
Back when we didn't care to doublecheck for cops
before lighting up,

I noticed slivers missing from Big Tree's
trunk, chunks removed with the precision
of someone with a purpose, or in a lab coat;
all I learned at that State School was as long as it's deliberate,
it's okay to break the rules.

That's where they take samples of its DNA,
he told me as I pressed my fingers into a familiar damage.
I guess no one else believed it could last much longer.
They need hard proof of its existence, a piece of the parent
to perpetuate its legacy.
I couldn't even imagine it falling, a ton
of solid wood
toppling over
like a game of Jenga – everyone's favorite
at the barcade. But my grandmother liked to remind me
every empire falls.

Is there a difference
between preservation and conservation?
If scientists collect enough data to satisfy their thirst,
what will be left?

Its trunk scarred graph paper
like my calves – haven't we all been so desperate for answers
that we'll carve into living flesh, or steal some kid's debit card,
because at least we're getting somewhere?

My boyfriend made his first rule: I could never
lock myself in the bathroom again.
But if I want to outlive my grandmother,
then I must make it through the night,
No matter how deep I have to cut

The Enchanted Forest

After Chen Chen

The gift was left on my welcome mat like a borrowed tool returned by my neighbor who hated small talk but loved to jump on trampolines with me. Upon inspection, it was a glass bottle of syrup, wrapped in a bow. It came with a tag that read, *Just drink me, for the love of God*. It could have been a trick. My neighbor peered through the curtains with wondering eyes that encouraged me to choose. It burned going down. I found myself in the woods where I hid as a child, but this time, I came across a hole in a tree trunk, & boy, when I climbed in, the same world but sandpapered surrounded me, where women had been presidents & there's money in the bank; so throw away your security system, my neighbor. & here, take this gift, it will replace uncertainty with embers better than any self-help book or fad diet ever could. Just believe me when I say, *you'll be thankful for the fear*, as life here is sweet, sweet, sweet.

Disposable

I reconstruct the Milky Way
and bite my lip until I can taste
that familiar metal,
otherwise, I will erupt
like the burial ground
of one thousand virgins.

I can see everything
from way up here:
bugs, old people, Chinese
factory workers in saggy pants.
(No belts – It's Been 305 Days
Since Our Last Suicide!)

I could have chosen to reincarnate,
but I have seen how the universe
lights up each time a human dies.
Instead I chose to ease its suffering
and hurry along the end of the world.

Star Signs

The sun rises on my drive to work, and I blush along
when my regular comes in. I make her latte
exactly right: My fingers smooth
the grounds and test the milk.

I undercharge.

It's a miracle I make it at six. I don't believe anyone
looks twice at my undone face or apron-covered tits.
On my days off from being a deli girl, I shave
my legs, take boiling baths. But I still get sticky
from smoking wax.

There are dishes every day. An excuse
to get away from unwanted questions:
"What's wrong?" "What do you have that's gluten-free?"
I'm just too busy to answer the phone. Let me
make my money and go.

Boys hurl slurs from car windows. I flip them off
and it feels good, though not as good as pressing
my foot down as far as it will go
to see what happens. I wonder if any of it's worth it

when my uncle visits and complains.
Mandatory sexual harassment training at his new job.
I've had to file two complaints in a year
at one of mine. It's hard to get by. The grocery bills
are high so I go without eating
until a student brings me an apple. I've learned
to love how it tears at my gums
and sticks between my teeth.
I make sure to only consume it with water
after an old friend told me fruit ferments
in your stomach if it's too full.

My uncle lives in Thailand – he said to me, as a kid,
the reason I want to explore like him
is because both our suns are in Aquarius.
Now he just PayPal's me. Maybe I can save up
enough and use my change from the tip jar
to visit Thailand.
I've always wondered about its sunrise.

Why I Like Bad Boys According to the PCL-5

He used to save his empty lighters in a shoebox, tagged with their death dates
in permanent marker. He did this until he got arrested with a white
lighter in the cupholder of his car. Questions to be answered on a scale of *Not*
at All to *Extremely* on the form at my therapist's office: *Being superalert,*
watchful, or *on guard?* He couldn't shake it, the white lighter's presence like a
stranger's ghost. The night the window was broken, the white lighter lay
amongst the shards. It stalked him, hiding in friends' pockets and in the
gutter. The white lighter on the coffee table at a co-worker's house party, where
we were right before our first falling out, lives on in the background of this
Polaroid: Me and my long hair draped over his lap, both of us laughing. The
picture is on my fridge, a reminder of our potential. *Feeling distant or cut off*
from other people? He hated the way I showed it off, he said
it's like having an upside-down cross over the front door. I like that idea,
though, the same way I like lightning storms and snorting lines.
Taking too many risks or doing things that could cause you harm?
We used to cruise around college towns passing his piece until we burnt
it all up, throwing our heads back as we released smoke like steam engines.
We did this until he got arrested with a white lighter in the cupholder of his
car – *having negative beliefs about yourself or the world?* – and I prayed to my
rosary as if I believed the Holy Spirit lived there and not in empty lighters.