

*Phototaxis and Other Stories*

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree at Sarah Lawrence College, May 2017

“Blue”

Promise me, she said, that you will remember what I feel like in case I get sick like my mother. We are eleven so I cannot imagine Linnie being like her mother but I promised I would. I was walking home from the bus with Linnie and Luke when Linnie pulled me into her garage and made me close my eyes while she ran the tips of my fingers over her face. She has buckteeth and giant orange freckles that melt into another and the most beautiful half-moon eyebrows I have ever seen. I knew I should feel very serious as she traced her nose her ears her lips with my fingers, but all I could think was how strange it is that her freckles are such an important part of her face, yet I couldn't feel them with my fingertips.

Mrs. Potash has throat cancer that spread so fast now she has tumors bulging beneath her skin and I worry every day that her skin will rip. She hasn't gotten out of bed for over a month and the lids of her eyes are moist and crusty and her skin is yellow and thin like paper and her mouth is never closed.

When the doctors finally decided there was nothing more they could do for her, Mr. Potash decided to bring his wife home so she could enjoy her last months in the comfort of her own house, surrounded by friends. But I've never seen anyone at the Potash's—when the neighbors bring dinner in tinfoil casseroles they stand on the porch while talking to Mr. Potash or Linnie and never come in. Mr. Potash rented a full hospital bed that you could wheel from room to room. But the bed is too wide to fit through any of the doorframes in the

rooms of the Potash's house, and so Mr. Potash and my father had to turn it on its side to get it into the living room. Mr. Potash hired a home health aide name CeeCee who smells like oranges and has skin the color of coffee with lots of cream. She was the one who suggested Mrs. Potash be set up on the first floor in the bay window, where she wouldn't have to walk the stairs and she could enjoy the sunlight.

Mrs. Potash used to walk.

At school on Tuesdays, instead of going to music, they make Lynn timer talk to Mrs. Wharton in her tiny office on the second floor. The office smells like baby powder and pumpkin pie. Lynn timer cried so hard the first time they made her go, and when they asked what might help she told them me. Now I am allowed to go with her, but I am asked to sit quietly in the corner of the office and just listen and hold Lynn timer's hand if she wants. At the beginning of each session Mrs. Wharton asks Lynn timer to point to a big poster that hangs behind her desk and has ten yellow smiley faces on it numbered one to ten, their mouths all in slightly varying stages of a smile or frown. Lynn timer points to number five, the face with the straight line for a mouth, and Mrs. Wharton says that's good Lynn timer, that's good.

I've started having nightmares so bad that I wake up screaming and my parents have to come in and sit with me until I calm down, so now I see Mrs. Wharton on my own. Lynn timer doesn't come to my appointments with me, and I don't have to point to a smiley face on the chart which is a good thing because I don't know which one I'd be.

When Luke and Linnie and I walk home from the school bus we all get quiet when we get to the Potash's. Linnie lingers outside until Luke and I have to get home for dinner, or until the mosquitoes get too bad. Mr. Potash has started working nights at the restaurant he manages, and my mother explains that insurance isn't what it used to be, and that Mr. Potash has a heart of gold. When CeeCee goes home for the night Linnie is all alone, so sometimes we have her over for dinner, and sometimes she heats up something from the freezer that the neighbors have packed with meals.

Last week when I was over at Linnie's CeeCee told us that Mrs. Potash can still hear everything we say even though she can't respond, so we should try and talk to her just like anyone else. Linnie has decided to start practicing her flute in the living room so her mother can listen and CeeCee thinks this is a wonderful idea. Linnie plays standing beside the bed with her music on the silver music stand, and I sit in the corner and watch, and CeeCee sits on the couch and knits. Once in a while she glances up at the red flashing light hooked up to a machine that helps Mrs. Potash breathe, and then returns to her knitting.

This one is called *Aria*, Linnie says. This one is called *Major and Minor Scales*. I stare at Mrs. Potash's chest rising and falling while Linnie plays, and if I watch long enough her breath starts to correspond with the red light that flashes on and off on and off on the table beside the bed. Sometimes I think she looks like a robot that malfunctioned. Linnie finishes playing and curtsies as I clap and say Bravo! Bravo! Then she puts her flute back into the black case lined with navy velvet the exact shade of the night sky.

CeeCee told us that we could talk to Mrs. Potash and touch her and do everything we could do before, but I never touched Mrs. Potash when she wasn't sick and I am not going to start now. She told us that Mrs. Potash wasn't in pain, but that if she ever made a noise we could hold a cool washcloth up to her forehead or rub the inside of her wrist, and that we should call her immediately if the red light on the bed side table stopped flashing. Mrs. Potash rarely makes a sound and she just lies in the bay window where the whole neighborhood can see her, like the patron saint of decay already watching over our every move.

I recently found out that CeeCee is a home health aide and that she only works with people who are going to die no matter what she does, and I wonder if this is the job nurses have who are not really good nurses at all. CeeCee tells Lynn timer and me that death is nothing to fear, and she says it in a voice not quite speaking, not quite singing, so I believe her. Lynn timer is scared that she won't know when the end is coming, so CeeCee told us in her honey voice that when Mrs. Potash's feet start to turn blue the process is beginning. I never knew dying was a process before, I just thought it happened. Mrs. Potash's feet are tucked tightly into the white thermal blanket, and Lynn timer and I are too scared to loosen the blanket to look. Instead, Lynn timer runs her fingers over the large vein that stretches across the top of Mrs. Potash's hand and tells me it feels cold.

Lynn timer says she wants to die from the impact of a car accident, or blow up in an airplane, or skydive and have her chute malfunction.

Quick and painless, she says, snapping her fingers in my face. Quick and painless. I tell her I want to die in my sleep because it sounds more peaceful than

plummeting from ten thousand feet and knowing for however many minutes that it's all over.

Dying in your sleep is the most terrifying way to die, Linnie says, because you might just think you are dreaming and you won't know you're really in heaven and you'll just spend the rest of eternity waiting to wake up. I tell her she's right and she kisses my cheek. Now when I wake up each morning I pinch myself three times on the skin behind my ear, just like Mrs. Wharton taught me, and I repeat:

You're alive.

You're alive.

You're alive.

The power is out and the moon is out and people are emptying out lethargically from their houses as the lure of the cool air and the soft light of the moon become too much to resist.

Up and down our street lights flicker on and off and off and on until all goes black and nothing but the moon can be seen. Electrical lines sizzle like cool water on a scalding pan. 10:45 at night and most our neighbors have changed out of their day clothes and are barefoot, unpinned and untucked. Some carry their sleeping children outside in their arms, and I laugh because the lights were out in the children's rooms before the power went out, but something about the fact that

the whole neighborhood is dark, that the dark is inescapable, makes even the adults slightly afraid.

After a few minutes my eyes adjust to the dark. My neighbors glow blue in the light of the moon. Up and down the curb on either side of the street my neighbors have claimed the space in front of their homes, standing at first, but eventually giving in to the muggy air that has caused their ankles to swell and their hair to frizz and allowing themselves to sit on the pavement. The grass is mostly still wet from the sprinklers that ticked ticked ticked during the day to keep the lawns looking green and the children feeling cool.

The Thomases stand in front of their ranch close to one another and speak in quiet tones about something serious. The youngest Thomas kid holds their whimpering chihuahua, Franz. The Bakers are singing Yankee Doodle in high-pitched voices because Charlie is crying and Mrs. Baker doesn't know what else to do. The Lowell twins are sleeping, one in each of their parents' laps, and I think about how strange it is that they will wake up in the morning without ever knowing they were carried outside in their matching dinosaur footies to sleep in the laps of their parents. The Henderson's flashlights wave around frantically for a few minutes before they realize that the darkness left in the burst of the light's wake is deeper than the darkness before the flashlight. Fireflies scatter drops of light through the air like tiny lighthouses, and I wonder if I killed one and rubbed its guts on my hands if my hands would glow long enough for me to go back into the house and get some socks because my feet are getting cold on the asphalt.

There are neighbors I didn't know I had.

One man leans against the willow tree in the Dryer's yard. He wears black jeans and holds a leather backpack. He isn't messy like the Dryers. When I was young my mother scolded me for making fun of the Dryer's messiness, and explained that it's not their fault. Jack was born with something not quite right in the head, my mother explained, and it's a miracle they get out the door every morning. A true miracle if my mother had ever seen one. Jack was in my third grade class and he would ask questions that had nothing to do with anything: If dogs see in black and white then why are there brown dogs? Do babies ever get stuck inside their mother's bellies? Why does Jenny have a pink mark the shape of California on her cheek? Will you be my friend? Will you be my friend? Will you be my friend? Mrs. Longhorn finally sent Jack into the hall and I haven't seen him at school since. Sometimes at night from my bedroom I can hear Mrs. Dryer yelling, and sometimes I can hear the soft padding sound of Mr. Dryers feet sinking into wet grass or crunching on dead leaves or packing melting snow as he paces the lawn and smokes a cigarette. Mrs. Dryer won't let him smoke inside, and Mom clicks her tongue at his smoking and says, we might as well start digging his grave.

People come and go from the Dryer house, parking their minivans or station wagons or sedans at the curb in front. In the summertime when they come outside their windshields are covered in yellow pollen so thick they have to use their snowbrushes to clear it off. One man who carries an orange Canvas NPR tote bag and walks with a limp comes to teach Jack what he misses in school, and I'm glad the Dryers have arranged this because at home Jack can't get sent into

the hall for asking too many questions. On Thursdays a woman who wears tiny crocheted caps on top of her red curly hair and white sneakers with the thickest soles I have ever seen helps Mrs. Dryer clean the house.

The unfamiliar man still leans against the willow tree in front of the Dryer's and I watch as he flicks his thumb one two three times on the silver ridges of his lighter until a tiny flame illuminates his long face and the dark stubble of his chin and cheeks and the skin between the hook of his nose and the curve of his upper lip. He holds the lighter so close to his face that I worry his blue black hair will catch fire, but he's done this before and he knows just when to pull the lighter away. The tiny orange flame slowly eats the white of his cigarette, leaving a shriveled ashy trail in its wake. He looks down at his shoes and inhales deeply, smacking his hand against his upper thigh. He turns and sees that I am staring at him and he salutes me like a soldier. The other day I overheard my mother talking to Mrs. Langston, and Mrs. Langston was complaining about Jinny's new boyfriend. How he looked a bit rough around the edges. I wonder if this is him. I immediately turn around and start walking, looking for Linnie.

There are only five different styles of houses in my neighborhood, and so every few houses one is the same. There is a ranch that the Bakers and the Kennedys live in, and the one with the wrap-around porch like Luke's. Linnie's and my house are the same but flipped backwards, so when I go over to Linnie's I end up in the laundry room when I have to take a leak.

I decide to head over to the Potash's because, even though we are eleven, Linnie is afraid of the dark, and even though we are eleven, I am in love with

Lynnie. I know she is still afraid of the dark because I can see into her room from my bedroom window if I stand on my desk and lean all the way to the right, and she sleeps with her closet light on, the light filtering through the tiny slats in her closet doors and zebra striping her carpet.

Lynnie sits in front of Luke's house in cut-off jean shorts and a pink and white t-shirt too big for her body. She cries into her knees, her back bouncing up and down and Luke looks around nervously biting his fingernails. Luke, Lynnie and I live three in a row and I'm pretty sure Luke's in love with Lynnie too. I don't take him seriously because Luke's entire wardrobe is made up of t-shirts he got free from participating in various school and church activities, and he bites his fingernails so low they bleed, and then he sucks the blood off and waits for the them to grow so he can do it all over again. A group of moms stand a few feet away from Lynnie in a tight circle, and they look like the huddle coach makes us do before soccer games. They don't ask Lynnie if she needs anything because they are afraid of what her answer might be.

I sit down on the curb on the other side of Lynnie.

Hey Bri, Lynnie says, looking up at me with her string hair and eyelashes that are dark and shiny and clinging together from her tears. Lynnie never calls me Brian, only Bri.

I called my father at work and told him the red light stopped flashing, and he said he would come home and she would be okay without it for a little, Lynnie says.

That's good, I say, remembering CeeCee's instructions.

She will be so afraid of the dark, she says. She is thinking about her mother. She forgets that her mother's eyes have been closed for three weeks, and that she's used to the dark. Maybe, Linnie says, she is replaying all the good times from her life like a slideshow. When we went skiing in Vermont, when Skipper went missing and then we found him at the Baker's, when she dropped my birthday cake on the way to the dining room and we ate it off the floor. Maybe she doesn't even know she is dying. Linnie has a soft spot for happy endings.

Maybe, she says, she is writing a list of instructions for my dad like where to take me for a prom dress and how to get the dried sauce off the pan after making lasagna and how I like my back rubbed when I stay home from school sick. Maybe before it happens she will wake up and tell CeeCee to write it all down so my dad knows what to do.

Maybe she is thinking of you, I say. And how one day you are going to grow up and be a famous flautist or a chef who makes gourmet macaroni and cheese and serves it to the President and his family. I know I sound silly but I am trying to make Linnie laugh.

Maybe she's already dead, Linnie says, but her heart just won't stop beating because she is too young to die so it is confused. The skin beneath Linnie's throat and on her chest turns red. This ending isn't so happy.

She is crying. Luke says, Don't cry, and she tells him she's sorry but today she just can't help it. Linnie cries because while all our neighbors are outside, Mrs. Potash is still in the house, still in her rented hospital bed, perfectly framed in the bay window with her matted hair and her blue quilted robe.

It'll be my fault, Linnie says, turning around and looking at the window. It'll be my fault that she dies because I left her in there and CeeCee has gone home and you two aren't strong enough to lift the bed and turn it on its side, and the red button has stopped flashing. She looks at me, the pupils of her eyes almost blacking out the blue rings that surround them.

I know how you feel, Luke says, because one time when we were little, my grandma was on a machine that helped her breathe, and I tripped over the cord and the machine came unplugged and she died. Which basically makes me a murderer.

I met your grandma last weekend at the Fourth of July barbeque, I say. The moon turns Luke's face blue and he looks how he did right before he vomited all over the playground in fourth grade.

I actually saw it in one of those TV movies my mom watches, he says. But I cried after I saw it and so I understand how you feel. Linnie nods and looks at me with her dark shiny lashes and stringy hair. I tell Luke that is the second dumbest thing he has ever said, only second to the time he told Mrs. Dryer that she had beautifully shaped legs for a woman of her age.

But in the end of the movie, the girl got straight A's and went to Bryn Mawr where she graduated with honors and became a famous poet, and no one cared that she sort of kind of killed her grandmother, Luke says. He's speaking so fast that one word loops into another and his spit gathers in white beads at the corner of his mouth. I stare at him blankly and roll my eyes like my mother tells

me not to until he lets out a deep break and, licking the corners of his mouth, stands up from the curb.

Lynnie doesn't even want to be a poet. She wants to be a chef.

The man with the long face and the blue-black hair walks down the center of the street and he stops when he gets to Lynnie and me.

Goddamn electricity, he says, forgetting that we are kids, and he tosses a quarter at Lynnie. Don't cry, pretty girl, he says. A face like yours should never be sad. His hands are shaking and his eyes look wet. You're a lucky man, he says to me, and it's the first time anyone has ever called me that. He turns around and keeps walking in the direction of the Dryer's, and Lynnie presses the quarter into her palm so hard that when she finally releases it leaves a pink imprint.

I'm feeling like a one, she says, and purposefully drags the corners of her mouth down into the exaggerated frown like the smiley face on Mrs. Wharton's feelings poster.

Luke heads toward us half walking, half skipping, and as he bounces, his shirt rides up revealing a strip of white skin oozing sluggishly over the belt of his baggy jeans. Sometimes in the locker room he pulls the waistband away from his belly and tells me he's getting skinny, but I know his mom just buys them too big in the first place.

Listen guys, he says, out of breath. I don't know what that guy said, but I can beat up that punk if he's bothering you. He turns in the direction the man with

the blue-black hair walked, and he punches the air in front of us making pow pow pow noises.

I want to go check on her, Lynn timer says, and I decide to go with her. Luke says he is going to go looking for the guy, but I know he's just too scared to come with us. He hasn't been inside the Potash's since Mrs. Potash got sick, never listened to Lynn timer play the flute while CeeCee knits. When we get to the Potash's I press my nose up against the bay window and it steams and fogs beneath my breath, and I quickly run my tongue up against the cool glass leaving a wet diagonal streak. Inside Mrs. Potash lays in the bed with her feet sticking out from the end of her thermal blanket, long and veiny. The red flashing light does not flash.

They're blue, Lynn timer says. She has turned toward me, and her mouth never closed when she finished speaking so her lips are still rounded around her last word.

Everyone looks blue in the moonlight, I say, and hold my arm up as proof. Lynn timer continues to press her nose up against the window, and I take a few steps back and look at Lynn timer and Luke's and my houses three in a row. Besides the wraparound porch on Luke's house and the red garage door on mine, the houses are the same. They were built for people with dogs and retirement plans and two cars to fill the two-car garages.

In the third grade I did a report on Saturn and I learned its rings are made up of millions of ice crystals, and that some are as small as dust particles and some are as big as houses. I also learned that if Saturn was put into a bathtub it

would float, but I don't know how the scientists could possibly know that. I try to imagine Linnie's house: a giant ice crystal floating in a claw-footed tub.

The streetlamps flicker at first, but then gain confidence and bathe the street in a bright yellow tint. The stars turn off. The Potash's living room stays dark because her lights have been off since eight o'clock when CeeCee packed up her knitting and left for the night. We can no longer see Mrs. Potash through the window, and instead we only see ourselves standing a few feet apart on the lawn, our arms crossed, and if I squint really hard I can see the red light on the table next to Mrs. Potash's bed is pulsing now. Linnie asks me to please leave her alone and she cries, but the red light flashes again so I walk back toward my house.

Everyone wanders back into their homes. Their movements are swift and pointed, not the gentle drifting gaits they had on their way out. The youngest Thomas kid walks their chihuahua Franz back and forth on their lawn until it finally raises its twig leg and pees. The Bakers stopped singing Yankee Doodle a while ago, and Mr. Baker carries Charlie who has fallen asleep. Mrs. Baker pauses on her driveway and looks up toward the sky, revealing the white column of her neck as if to say, well that was interesting, before she turns around and follows her husband and sleeping child into their ranch. The Lowell kids are still asleep in their matching dinosaur footies, and they will never know because they were sleeping far away on Mount Everest or in space or in a gingerbread house on Christmas Eve. The man with the blue-black hair is nowhere to be found.

I hear Mrs. Dryer scream first, a high pitch shriek that breaks off at the end leaving its echo to fly around the neighborhood, bouncing off roofs and ricocheting off garage doors to die on flat window glass. I hear her scream before I see her running through her front door with Jack behind her. Jack presses his hands up against his ears, his elbows wide, and he hums a song with no tune. Mrs. Dryer's shoes are off and her shirt hangs out of her skirt on one side.

What kind of sick fuck would do this, she yells, and I can't tell if she is talking to anyone in particular. Jack takes his hands off his ears.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he yells. Fuck a duck. Fuck a truck. Fuck a cluck. Mrs. Dryer doesn't tell him to stop, and Mr. Dryer leans out their bedroom window watching his wife and son and smoking a cigarette. Mrs. Luther and Mrs. Wilson and Mr. Dimateo come outside and they are shaking their heads and Mrs. Luther holds up a wooden box with her initials engraved on the cover, and she shakes it up and down violently to illustrate its emptiness.

Looks like the adults were right to be afraid.

They took it all, Mrs. Luther says, finally letting the box fall out of her shaking fat hands and onto the lawn.

I walk inside, Mrs. Dryer says. Happy the electrical company finally decided to do their job, and I go up to my room and almost break my damn neck tripping over all the shit that's thrown on the bedroom floor.

I have never heard her swear so much, not even the time Jack started a bonfire from Mr. Dryer's antique ship models in the garage.

My father's gold pocket watch, Mr. Dimateo says. Of all the things to steal. Doesn't even keep time anymore.

Yea, but it's pure gold, Mrs. Dryer says. They steal the crap just to melt it down and sell it. That way they can't get caught. They don't even care what it is.

Brought it with him all the way from Italy, Mr. Dimateo says. Goddamn scum.

Go inside and find daddy, Jack.

Monopolizing on the damn electrical company.

Almost broke my fucking neck.

The man standing against the tree, I'd never seen him before. The one with the blue-black hair.

My Thanksgiving platter. Looks like I'll be serving holidays off paper this year.

Mrs. Wilson doesn't say anything but just watches as they all spit words and my feet are cold and *blackout* makes no sense because blue is the color of darkness with no lights on and Mrs. Potash's feet are still white and Jack hums and Charlie cries and I leave them all screaming on their lawns and run next door to Linnie's house. Her front door is locked and I ring the bell six times because CeeCee is lying in her soupy voice, Mrs. Potash can't hear a damn thing. Linnie answers the door and she has changed out of her jean shorts and into a pair of thin pink boxers, her stringy hair pulled up into a knot on the top of her head. She comes out onto the porch and hugs me. She has heard all the commotion through her bedroom window and she tells me nothing of theirs is missing.

Not even your flute, I ask, remembering what they said about the silver.

Not even my flute, she says.

We sit down on Linnie's front stoop and our knees knock into one another as she leans her head on my shoulder. I let my chin rest on top of her head because the man with the blue black hair called me a man, and her hair smells like sweat and lavender. I think of wrapping my arm around her waist but I decide to stay how we are.

Really? Nothing was missing, I ask, because it seems like everyone else is missing something and the Potash's aren't exactly known for good luck.

Not a thing, she says, shaking her head on my shoulder. The people are still screaming and Mrs. Dryer has sent Jack back inside, and Linnie starts to laugh and I can feel her body shaking against my shoulder and arm even though her she laughs silently. She finally lifts her head and turns to face me.

The red light is flashing again, she says.

Good, I say.

Linnie smiles for the first time all night. My mother scared him away, she says. She smiles and her buckteeth protrude over her lower lip. He walked in with his black gloves and his black boots thinking he was all scary, and then there she is, and suddenly he's the one who's scared. She saved us.

He broke in and saw your mom and got the crap scared out of him, I say, and Linnie laughs again, her half-moon eyebrows reaching toward his hairline, and I smile knowing I made them do that. The best security guard money can buy, I say.

Maybe he even screamed, Linnie says, and she smacks her hands over her eyes, and I don't tell her that I think we would have heard him if he screamed. Can you imagine, she says. He walks into my house looking for a nice gold watch or a necklace or maybe a ring if he's lucky, and instead he finds...

He finds your mom lying there like a half dead bodyguard, I say. Like a freaking mummy.

Linnie looks serious and her smile has faded and her half-moon eyebrows have lowered, and I see I've taken it too far. I bite the inside of my inner cheek until I taste the iron blood.

He could have taken our stuff, she says. My mom's wedding band was on the nightstand next to her bed because it keeps falling off now. Her fingers have gotten so skinny. He could have taken our stuff but he didn't Bri.

I look at her face, the relief of the robber passing up their home momentarily making her forget that her mother is dying, and I wonder if even robbers know better than to kick someone when they're already down.

Mr. Dimateo walks from house to house asking people what they're missing and recording it in a tiny blue notebook. He licks his fingers to flip the pages and keeps shaking his head from side to side, the lobes of his droopy ears wiggling with each movement. He is bowlegged and barefoot and he walks on the gravel of the road without flinching, and it makes me wonder if he was something special before he was old, like a performer or a soldier.

Mr. Dimateo says he will call the police in the morning, and that probably some asswipe cut the power lines, but that we have all had enough commotion for one night. Mrs. Dryer and Mrs. Luther and Mrs. Wilson all drift back inside. Mrs. Luther leaves her jewelry box on the lawn, and I wonder if it will be there in the morning. Linnie goes inside to go to sleep, and I walk across her lawn and then across Luke's lawn to mine. I stand barefoot on the grass, the cold dew tickling the toes of my feet, and watch through the windows as Mrs. Dryer makes her way from the dining room to the kitchen to the living room to Jack's bedroom, turning on every light and glancing at her rose-gold watch as she resets the digital clocks that all flash twelve midnight.

I will set my alarm for extra early, and in the morning I will go to the Potash's and reset their clocks so Linnie isn't late for school.

"The Tennysons"

My best friend Mickey's mom drives a hearse. A 1989 Lincoln, black on the outside—which seems obvious but I have seen silver ones before—and black on the inside with headrests in the front seat that you can pull off and put under your feet as a cushion. A window divides the front seat from the back section and you can slide it open or closed. When it was used as a hearse I imagine it was usually closed to provide the family privacy, and sometimes if Mickey and I want to talk about something private we'll sit in the back seat and close the window. Usually, though, we want to talk to Mrs. Tennyson so we sit in the front on the bench—Mickey in the middle between his mom and me. The hearse stretches so long that people honk when Mrs. Tennyson makes turns because she usually ends up taking two lanes, and when she parks it the end sticks out half way into the street. Not many people have been inside the hearse, and even fewer know why she drives it.

When it's nice outside Mrs. Tennyson drives around Piedmont to do her errands with the windows down and her long claw-like hand hanging out. She doesn't tie her hair back and it blows around in her face and she shakes her head back and forth and smiles and waves, though it's rare that anyone waves back. In summertime she parks the hearse on the driveway and turns the key half way in the ignition so she can listen to the radio while she washes it until its black finishing glistens on top of a silver soapy pool filled with tiny rainbows. She washes the car in the same red swimsuit with the loose linen dress over it each

time, and when the linen gets wet it looks pink. Sometimes she tells Mickey and me to put on our swim trunks, that she needs some strong men to help her with the job. Mrs. Tennyson throws soapy sponges at our bare chests and sprays the hose in our direction laughing and showing her big square teeth. In the winter she puts chains on the tires and salt stains the exterior, leaving marks on my black coat when I accidentally rub up against it.

I ask Mickey why sometimes his mom drives around the neighborhood in circles, and he tells me she's homesick for the road.

On most school days—not Tuesdays because I spend Monday nights with Kyle at my dad's apartment in Hapshire—Mrs. Tennyson drops me off and picks me up from school in the hearse. The teachers just think it's strange and the kids call us zombies, running, screaming, arms outstretched and big heavy Frankenstein steps in the playground, while the older boys call Mrs. Tennyson names I should not know, but learned from my dad. Mrs. Tennyson tells us people are always scared of something a little different, but this doesn't stop the kids from trying to stuff our lockers with their lunch leftovers on Fridays so that they rot over the weekend and stink up our gym uniforms.

They wouldn't know a good deal if it smacked them over the head, Mrs. Tennyson says as I pull the door shut behind me and nudge Mickey in the ribs so he'll scoot closer to the center of the front bench.

I know, Mom, Mickey says.

Mrs. Tennyson always has two cold Cokes with two straws opened and waiting in the cup holders of the front seat when Mickey and I get in the car. She

leaves the little top of the wrapper on the straw to keep it clean like they do in diners, and she buys real Coca Cola instead of the fake stuff my mom buys. She lets us listen to whatever we want on the radio and she knows the words to the songs. Sometimes she asks me to light her lighter and she leans her face in real close to my hands until her cigarette catches. She doesn't really care if we swear but it makes me feel funny to swear around her so I usually don't.

One day on the way home from school I point to the car in front of ours.

That's Aubrey's car, I say. Aubrey is a girl with two reddish brown braids and long fingernails who Mickey likes, but who doesn't know Mickey exists.

Who is Aubrey, Mrs. Tennyson asks?

No one, Mickey says, his eyes in his lap. Mrs. Tennyson turns her head from the road to look at me. She winks one of her blue-green eyes.

She's a girl Mickey likes, I say. Mrs. Tennyson throws her head back and laughs

Station wagon, she says, staring right at me and rolling her eyes. I giggle, and then she reaches across the front seat, her stomach and chest grazing the top of my thighs. I sit as still as I can and feel the blood rush to my ears. She cranks the window down all the way. She turns the music up so loud I can't hear what Mickey says, I can only see his head shaking no, no, no. We speed up and pull past Aubrey's car. Mickey stares out the window and, as we pass, Aubrey smiles and waves, her thick braids swaying on her back.

Boys, Mrs. Tennyson says. Two things to always remember. Girls love fast cars and dangerous men.

Sometimes in the hearse on the way home from school people slow down and let us pass because they think we're carrying a dead body. Sometimes Mrs. Tennyson runs a red light because a hearse can do that. Usually people look out the windows of the cars with sad faces until they see Mrs. Tennyson's painted fingernails hanging out the driver's window, or her big square teeth smiling at them in the rearview mirror. There she goes, driving around in the hearse she bought cheap when the funeral home upgraded to a shinier one with silver rims that had *Purcell's* stamped in white script on the trunk.

My mother went to college with Mrs. Tennyson when she was a redhead and didn't smoke cigarettes. They would study together in each other's dorm rooms and go to movies with their boyfriends on the weekends. I can't imagine my mother with a boyfriend. My mom once told me Mrs. Tennyson was popular then, and I sometimes try to imagine her with whiter teeth and redder hair. My mother and Mrs. Tennyson used to volunteer together at the Piedmont Community Food Pantry sorting cans, but Mrs. Tennyson eventually stopped showing up for her shifts.

It's better, my mother says. She flirted shamelessly with Ted who runs the place even though she very well knows that he's married. Ted calls Mrs. Tennyson his Sugar Do Gooder and he calls my mother Esther. My mother is always neat and clean with painted nails and soft pink lipstick. She says it's a disgrace how Mrs. Tennyson goes out with her hair all a mess and her tight clothes all wrinkly. You get to a certain age where it's best to leave more to the

imagination, she says. She says she has half a mind not to let me drive in the hearse to school anymore, but for Mickey's sake she allows it.

After my father left, some of the ladies started to talk bad about my mother and she would cry all the time. Mrs. Tennyson never cared what the ladies thought. She would come and sit on the driveway with my mother after picking us up from school and they would drink spiked lemonade and laugh. Mrs. Tennyson would paint my mother's nails the red of her own but it looked funny on my mother.

On Fridays sometimes Mrs. Tennyson forgets to come home and my mother sends me across the street to pick up Mickey so he can spend the night at our house. On those nights she makes pot roast or turkey or potpie instead of something frozen and she gives Mickey seconds if he asks, which he usually does. She lets us go play catch in the yard without asking us to help clear the table. After dinner, when Mickey and I play outside, the women come over and play mahjong and we can hear them talking from the yard.

It's really a shame, my mother says. And of all people, I should know, living without Jim for so many years and being on my own with the boys. So, any way I can help that poor soul out, I will. The women click their tongues against the roofs of their mouths and tell my mother she has a helping spirit.

It's nothing really, my mother says, and I imagine her flicking her wrist. I know you'd all do the same for me.

When we are tired of playing catch but not tired enough for bed we tell my mother we are going to play kickball with the other boys on the street and Mickey

and my brother Kyle and I go to Mickey's house. Mrs. Tennyson never takes the hearse when she goes out for the night, and she never locks it. When Mrs. Tennyson bought the hearse from Purcell's Funeral Home she negotiated for fifty dollars extra that they install two benches in the back that run the length of the car, facing the center. For extra seating, Mrs. Tennyson said, though I have never seen her drive anyone but Mickey and me.

Mickey, Kyle, and I take turns lying in between the two benches on the cold metal track Mickey says used to hold the casket in place. We chant songs and cross one another and try to make ourselves cry by slapping at our cheeks and pulling our hair. I lie in the middle first and look up at the gray-pilled fabric that covers the walls and ceiling.

Here lays Benji Henderson, Mickey says. He will always be remembered for his love of rocky road ice cream, his inability to talk to girls, and his pretty good arm.

Mickey lies on his back. Kyle and I start fake crying. I have a pretty good heave going, and with his eyes closed Mickey gasps and holds his breath so long he starts to turn blue and Kyle starts to actually cry.

Mickey is still on his back in the middle when we hear the familiar burping sound of the pickup truck that sometimes picks up Mrs. Tennyson. We hear the car pull up to the driveway and Kyle and I get down on the floor of the hearse next to Mickey and press our knees into our chests. Kyle's squeezes his eyes shut. Mrs. Tennyson knocks with her bony red knuckles on the window and I

can hear something scratching against the side of the car as she moves toward the door. When we don't answer she pulls the door open and sticks her head in.

Ah, well, they must be dead, she says in a voice that sound like she's swallowed nails. She's wearing a thin pink dress and the straps fall off her shoulders and when she bent over I could see she has nothing underneath. I can see the veins that spread across her eyeballs like red spider webs and her hair sticks up in a funny way. She has bright red lipstick smeared across her big square two front teeth. Her eyelids look heavy and droop lazily.

She closes the door and we stay on our backs on the floor of the hearse with our legs pulled into our chests until we see the light in her bedroom flick on.

Tramp, Mickey says quietly. He sits up and climbs toward the door. Spooked, we get out and run as fast as we can back to my house.

Now we don't play in the hearse at night because we never know when Mrs. Tennyson might come home. Mickey doesn't like talking about that night and Kyle still sleeps with his light on.

My mother is positive that Mrs. Tennyson is drinking now, and that she is in no state to be driving a car-hearse or any other for that matter. Those black circles don't come from nowhere you know. And to think in college I would have killed to look like her. That's what my mother says on the phone to the other women when she thinks I'm not listening. My mother calls Mrs. Tennyson and tells her that she wouldn't mind driving Mickey to school for the rest of the year. That Ted said it would be just fine if she came in at 9:30 instead of 8:30. Mrs.

Tennyson screams that she does not need anyone's charity thank you very much. Now Mickey and I drive separately to school.

I wait for Mickey under the flagpole every morning because now that my mother drives me to school I am always early. Every time Mrs. Tennyson swings the hearse out wide to make the right turn into school cars honk and Mrs. Tennyson smiles and waves with her fingers pressed together like a beauty queen. When she sees me waiting for Mickey she rolls down her window, flashes me her boxy teeth and shouts, who's that handsome fellow waiting for my son? Sometimes she puts an extra Twinkie in Mickey's lunch for him to give to me.

May, the nights are long and the grasshoppers cause the house to vibrate. Mickey has spent the last six nights in the top bunk. We sleep with the windows open and the overhead fan whirling, and each morning as the sun rises the slamming of a car door wakes us. We get up and lean out the open window and watch as Mrs. Tennyson slips out of the car and lopes up their driveway and in the unlocked front door. It's a Sunday and Kyle comes running into the kitchen all red-faced and bulgy-eyed screaming that the police are taking Mrs. Tennyson away. My mother goes running outside and tells me to stay with Kyle. Kyle and I pull kitchen chairs over to the open windows and kneel as our mother talks with the police.

Mrs. Tennyson sits on the roof of the hearse with a gray wooly blanket wrapped around her even though the summer air makes it warm enough to wear shorts. Her long bronzy legs poke out from the blanket and hang over the side of

the car, knocking against the windows. She kicks them forward and back, leaving an oily residue on the windows. She smiles, holding a giant purple tube of sunscreen. Her big white perfectly circular sunglasses cover her eyebrows and half her cheeks.

I don't think she is wearing her red swimsuit under that blanket. I don't think she is wearing anything at all.

Kyle and I crack open the window and hear the officer say something about public indecency. Mrs. Tennyson still smiles, but my mother does not. My mother speaks with the police officer and bobs her head knowingly. It's the same face she uses when she talks to my teachers, or like she used to have when she talked to my dad when he lived with us and he forgot to tell the dry cleaners extra starch. I've got it under control, my mother says to Mrs. Tennyson, but Mrs. Tennyson doesn't look concerned. She sits on the roof with a big toothy smile waving her beauty queen wave to the crowds that have gathered. The groups of people watch as my mother helps Mrs. Tennyson down from the roof and puts her arm securely around her waist even though Mrs. Tennyson is perfectly healthy and looks stronger than my mother. You should be ashamed of yourselves, my mother says to the neighbors.

Mickey sits on his bicycle in the shade of his garage. He looks like he is deciding whether or not he should take off.

In only a few minutes the police finish asking my mother and Mrs. Tennyson questions in our driveway. The neighbors have all wandered back to their homes. My mother walks with her arm still around Mrs. Tennyson's thin

waist toward our house and beside her my mother looks short and wide. Inside she sends Mrs. Tennyson upstairs to take a shower and tells Kyle and me to go outside and play with Mickey.

Mickey left the garage, but his red bicycle is there, tipped over on its side, and so we know he hasn't gone far. We walk over to the hearse and pull the doors but they are locked. I walk around to the other side and knock on the window and Kyle sticks his nose up against it for a few minutes. We give up and sit on the driveway with our backs against the tires.

Do you think she was naked, Kyle asks me in a whisper?

I nod.

Gross, he says.

Eventually Mickey comes out and I can tell he has been crying. His cheeks are splotched and his skin looks sticky, but I don't say anything.

You know how many dead people were in that car at one point, he says? I do not know but I nod like we share a secret.

We stand there in the quiet looking at one another and Kyle yawns and we walk slowly back to my house. Kyle sleeps on the floor of my bedroom instead of in his own bed because he doesn't want to miss any secrets Mickey might share. Mickey and I have the bunk bed.

In the morning my mother and Mrs. Tennyson sit at the kitchen table sipping coffee and eating English muffins covered in dark purple jam. Mrs. Tennyson has on her big white perfectly circular sunglasses that cover her eyebrows and half of her cheeks. She wears my mother's bathrobe but it's much

shorter on her and reveals her bronzy knees. Her hair looks greasy around her forehead. Neither of them says anything when we walk into the kitchen, but my mother looks up and smiles. She has set out three full plates of eggs, bacon and toast.

Now when was the last time you had a real hearty breakfast to start out your day, she says. Mickey doesn't respond.

My mother drives us to school in the station wagon. We don't turn on the radio and we don't talk. My mother pulls into a parking space at school and we follow her in.

I'll be here to pick you up at 3:00, she says, and turns left to head to the principal's office. I look at Mickey but he has already begun walking down the hall toward his locker.

Mrs. Tennyson doesn't seem to want to go home and my mother thinks it best she stays. So now Mrs. Tennyson sits in our living room all day in my mother's clothes she is too tall for and stares out the window at the front yard. My mother forbids smoking in the house, and instead Mrs. Tennyson taps the tips of her fingers against the arm of the couch, the windowsill, her sharp collar bone. My mother tells her she'll be just fine in no time, that she never doubted her for a second and Mrs. Tennyson just nods. Once in a while she holds an imaginary cigarette between her index and middle finger. She motions me over and I light a fake lighter for her and she takes a long drag, blowing air through the tiny hole in her pursed lips. She tells me that while she lives with us I can call her Susannah but the name feels strange on my tongue so I go on calling her Mrs. Tennyson.

My mother spends her afternoons asking Mrs. Tennyson if she needs anything, and calling her friends. I can hear their voices crackling and scratchy on our end of the line.

She's taking advantage of you, one friend says. You're going to regret this. It's really no trouble, my mother's favorite line, and she repeats it like a fanatic repeats hallelujah.

When Kyle and Mickey and I watch TV in the living room, Mrs. Tennyson doesn't turn around to face the TV. We wonder if she can even hear the noise. Mickey doesn't like being in the room with his maybe deaf mother, and so we play outside a lot. He no longer wants to play in the hearse.

We are playing football in the backyard when Mrs. Tennyson calls my name. I try to ignore her because she has started to scare me with her fake smoking and her dead eyes, but she continues to call, *Benji*. Mickey and Kyle don't seem to hear her and I head in through the sliding glass door to the kitchen.

Mrs. Tennyson sits on the white countertop in white underwear and a men's undershirt. I don't know where she got the shirt because my dad doesn't have clothes here anymore and the shirt is too big to be mine. Her green skirt is thrown on the floor beneath her and her feet rest inside the sink, her legs covered in thick shaving cream. She laughs so hard tears run down her face and I am not quite sure if she's happy or sad.

I cut myself, she says, pointing to the bump of her ankle where red blood mixes with the white shaving cream and forming a pinkish foam.

I stand in the doorway. She makes no effort to move. She just stares at me. Her eyes are wet. Her thighs are bare and aren't covered in foam and they look thin and smooth and dark. They don't have the tiny blue veins that I can see on my mother's legs when she goes to play tennis in her white pleated skirt. Her skin hangs loosely on her thigh and I can see a defined muscle line. I think of her red swimsuit and the way the white linen dress turns pink when it gets wet.

Turn the sink on, I say, my eyes not leaving the spot on her ankle. She holds her hands up to me. They are covered in thick white foam.

I walk over to the sink. Mrs. Tennyson looks at me and I can see a dusty black line under her eyelids where her makeup has smudged. I quickly lean over her legs and turn the sink on. I let the water warm up and then turn the faucet head toward Mrs. Tennyson.

Put your leg under it, I say. She does.

I am standing a few feet from Mrs. Tennyson holding a paper towel for her to put on her ankle when my mother walks in. My mother drops her grocery bags, and an onion rolls to the dishwasher and stops.

Susannah, get out, my mother shouts. Get the fuck out of my house.

I drop the paper towel and run to my room. From upstairs I can't make out words but I can hear my mother stomping around, something crashing against the wall, and Mrs. Tennyson laughing that belly laugh that makes everyone uncomfortable when it should make them happy. The noise stops after a few minutes and I lay on my bed pretending to read a comic.

My mother knocks on the door of my bedroom and asks me to go grocery shopping with her alone, which I haven't done since before I was in school, before Kyle was born, back when she took me along on all her errands. What about Kyle? I ask. She tells me Mickey will watch him and to get a move on it.

While driving in my mother's station wagon she tells me about how Mrs. Tennyson used to be even though she has already told me. I ask her if Mrs. Tennyson is going to be okay.

I really just don't know, she says.

Will Mickey live with us forever, I ask?

Mickey is meant to live with his mother.

But what if his mother leaves without him?

Why do you think she would do that, my mother asks. She has turned toward me and I am worried we are going to hit the car in front of us. I sit silently and squint my eyes so it looks like I am trying to see something very far in the distance because I do not know why I think she will leave without him but I do. My legs sweat behind the crease of my knee- I can feel them sticking to the leather of the seat. I see Mrs. Tennyson's bloody ankle, the color the exact same pink as my mother's lipstick.

It hasn't been easy since the basement flooded and Mr. Tennyson left them, my mother says.

I know, I say, although I have always thought a flood was a silly reason to leave your family.

It is very difficult to raise a child alone in this world, she says.

You did it with Kyle and me, I say. My mother smiles and rubs the side of my cheek with the back of her hand. It smells like mint.

Thank you, she says, but I'm not sure why she's thanking me.

When we get home Mrs. Tennyson is not sitting in the living room smoking a fake cigarette. I go upstairs and find Mickey reading a comic on the floor of my bedroom.

Where is your mom, I ask him?

At home.

At your home, I ask.

Yep.

I go downstairs and tell my mother because this seems important. My mother told her to get out but for some reason she still seems surprised to learn she has left and she goes over to the Tennysons. She doesn't come back for a long time. She comes home and tells Mickey the time has come for him to go home, but to call if he needs anything. Any single thing.

Summer comes and Mickey never comes outside to play. Kyle and I build a fort out of cardboard boxes my mother brought home from the food pantry but we forgot to drag it into the garage one night and the rain soaks through the boxes, revealing the thin cardboard spines that vertically align the inside casing. We discover that we can get to the top of the swing set by first climbing on the railing of our deck, then grabbing onto the rope wrapped around the top beam of the

swing set for this purpose, and finally scooting up the rope to the top beam. This will be useful for when I join the marines, and I begin to have Kyle time how long it takes me to get to the top. One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Kyle falls when he tries to break my record—the rope came untied—and he breaks his arm. For the rest of the summer I stay inside and read comics with Kyle because the rope was my idea.

My mother sends me over to the Tennysons with food she makes for them and puts in Tupperware. They never answer the door and so I leave the food on the porch. Sometimes someone takes it in. Sometimes, three days later, I go back and pick it up. Mrs. Tennyson has pulled the hearse into the garage and I haven't seen it out in months. Their driveway looks big and bare without it, the blacktop darker black in the shape of a rectangle where the hearse used to be parked, the surrounding blacktop a sad sun bleached gray.

One early evening the week before school reopens I hear the Tennysons garage creak open. I can hear the engine of the hearse starting, sputtering at first but gaining its familiar steady breath. Mrs. Tennyson pulls the hearse out onto the driveway and leaves it running. Through our open windows I can hear music blasting and Mrs. Tennyson carries boxes into the back where we used to play, singing along to the songs. Mickey comes outside and helps her and I consider going out to help too but instead I stay by the kitchen window. Mickey sees me but he doesn't wave. My mother is not home and I do not think I would go get her even if she was.

Mrs. Tennyson and Mickey stuff boxes into the long berth of the car until the windows turn cardboard colored and the two back doors barely close. Mrs. Tennyson wears a floral printed dress with orange and yellow poppies that clings to her hips with her white sunglasses. Her hair is wrapped in a red bandana. Mickey wears his favorite Batman t-shirt. He climbs into the front seat and I watch as he detaches the headrest cushion from behind him, puts it between his cheek and the window, and leans against it. Mrs. Tennyson pulls the hearse with the black outside and the black inside out of the driveway, pausing parallel to the curb.

We're hitting the road babe, she shouts in my direction over the blare of the radio, her voice strong and loud. She flashes me her toothy smile. In her bright dress her hair looks redder and her cheeks have a flush that makes her look happier than I've ever seen. She throws her head back and with her closed eyes she takes an exaggerated deep breath. I want to run down the street and after the hearse but instead I stand by the window watching until Mrs. Tennyson takes a fast left and the hearse disappears behind the pink of a magnolia tree in full bloom. I can hear the radio long after the hearse is out of sight.

When my mother gets home from work I tell her the Tennysons left and she sits on the couch rubbing the soles of her feet. That night the women come over and from upstairs I can hear their dice rolling on the card tables my mother has set up.

I walk across the hall into my mother's room and dig through her hamper until I find the floral robe she lent Mrs. Tennyson. I bring it back to my room and

sit on the carpet, inhaling her scent. A woman shouts *mahjong* and the others cheer.

"Cardigan"

Nothing black, she said. There's no reason for that. Let's pick something that will make my father smile and something she'll be comfortable in. The afternoon is so hot that the smell of cement wafts off the sidewalk and the tar strips that run down the center of the street soften like chewed gum. Inside Giselle's it's cool, so cool red goose pimples dot the back of Linnie's arms and she rubs at them with her palms, and the white sunlight filters just barely through velvety drapes. I pull a powder yellow cashmere sweater off a hanger and hand it to Linnie. She looks at the price tag and her eyes get big in that exaggerated cartoon way.

Not to buy, just to wear for now, I say, and she drapes the cardigan over her bony shoulders.

Hey Brian, did you know that pencil skirts make you look slim, and that often times full figured women don't wear them because they think they will hug in all the wrong places, but actually, they are more flattering than A-line skirts?

What is an A-line skirt, I say. And is there a B-line? Linnie rolls her eyes though I'm only half joking.

Did you know that every outfit should have three pieces to be considered complete, and that layers help add visual interest? Did you know that a lower neckline will draw attention to the face? I lift my eyebrows twice in mock seduction. Did you know that a petite woman should never, ever wear boot cut

jeans? Lynn timer pulls out a pink blouse with a floral print and holds it up to a plain pair of gray pants. The clothes remind me of our fourth grade teacher.

I want her to look elegant, but understated, she says. I think it's weird if she looks different than normal. Well, normal before, she says. I nod, remembering the shock of seeing my grandmother with a bouffant and a peach smile.

Where did you learn all this junk anyways? I say.

CeeCee always leaves her magazines behind, and it's not junk, Lynn timer says. Do you want to know what it says about trends for the winter?

Does it matter, I say, but immediately I regret it. I put my hand on Lynn timer's arm so she knows.

That's okay, Lynn timer says. My mother told me she wants to die in the summer so people won't be cold at the cemetery. When Lynn timer's mother could talk she made these kind of jokes. Do you know how quick my showers are now that I don't have to wash my hair? Do you know how much money I'm saving on eyebrow waxes? Do you realize you'll never have to change my diaper, Lynn timer dear? You should be thanking me, really.

We come to Giselle's because Lynn timer used to come here with her mother each December to help her pick out an outfit for Mr. Potash's office Christmas party. My mother never shops at Giselle's as far as I know. They play old jazz records and the bathroom smells like lavender and the carpet is so thick that my shoes leave indentations in it when I walk.

We stand in front of the tall wood framed mirror and Linnie holds clothes up in front of her body. I try to picture Mrs. Potash's head on Linnie's body but my eyes start to cross and I feel a pulsing behind my eyeballs. Each time Linnie holds up a new outfit she thrusts her right leg to the side, puts her arm on her hip, and tilts her head.

That is the most unflattering way to look in the mirror possible, I say, though I actually think it's the most beautiful thing in the world. Linnie tells me it takes twenty-one days to form a habit but four to five months to break one.

CeeCee's magazines? I say.

That one's from my dad, Linnie says. Mr. Potash works so much I wonder when he had time to tell her this fact, but this thought I keep to myself.

Mrs. Potash has gotten so skinny now that I'm not sure the elastic on the skirt Linnie holds would hang onto her waist. Seeing her reminds me of a horrible photography book my mother got for Christmas one year. All of the proceeds went to support an organization working in Rwanda. The one that really got me was of a woman carrying her baby in one arm and leading a mule in the other. The baby had the woman's breast clutched in his hands and was sucking for milk. The picture gave me nightmares and finally my mother took the book off the coffee table.

The saleswoman walks over and looks at the cardigan Linnie is holding.

Those are genuine copper buttons, the saleswoman says: very durable.

It's lovely, Linnie says. The saleswoman wanders back to the cash register and whispers something to the other saleswoman with the curly hair.

We decide on a pair of grey trousers that Lynn timer says won't dig into her mother's skin, a blouse with tiny houses printed on thin silk, and the genuine copper buttoned cardigan. At the cash register Lynn timer pays with her father's blue credit card, and she signs his name in looping script. We bike back to the Potash's with the shopping bag in Lynn timer's wicker basket, and by the time we pull into her driveway I'm sticky and flushed. The house has turned into a Hallmark gift shop, flower arrangements and candy Mrs. Potash can't eat and stuffed animals ridiculous for an adult sprawled on every surface. Mr. Potash does not know how to talk to Mrs. Potash anymore and so he works late and buys toys—that's what my mother says.

We wander into the front room where Mrs. Potash is, as always, in her rented hospital bed in the bay window, her lips dry and flaking. CeeCee sits at Mrs. Potash's feet knitting a sweater for her new niece and periodically pushing a button attached to a chord that gives Mrs. Potash more pain medication. Lynn timer walks to the side of the bed and runs her pinky finger along the vein on top of her mother's hand.

We went to Giselle's and picked something out, Mom, Lynn timer says. Brian helped me, or tried to at least. I make eye contact with CeeCee and she winks one of her almond honey eyes at me. Lynn timer pulls the clothing out of the bag and holds each up, piece by piece. Mrs. Potash's eyes remain closed but CeeCee oohs and aahs and Lynn timer glows.

The saleslady says the buttons are genuine copper. Extra durable, she said. They remind me of something a lady in waiting in one of those picture books you used to read me would wear. Lynn timer pinches the button of the cardigan between her thumb and index finger and holds it real close to Mrs. Potash's face. For a moment I think I see Mrs. Potash's eyes flutter, but Lynn timer doesn't seem to notice. Lynn timer carefully folds each piece of clothing, layering the cardigan on top of the shirt on top of the pants, and slides the pile neatly into the purple Giselle's bag.

Will you go put this in my room, Bri? Lynn timer says, and I leave her standing beside Mrs. Potash.

Tell me about how everyone else does it, Lynn timer says. I know you have been to a lot of them.

I tell her about my great aunt Sylvia's, where the minister accidentally forgot her name and referred to her as Florence, and how it made me happy because I could secretly pretend the entire time that it was all a big mistake. I tell her about my grandmother's, how Julia flew in from college and sang a song that made everybody cry. I tell her about Danny's and the tiny casket and the baseball mitt and how the entire little league team had shown up and so half the room had to stand.

We think about all the options there are, because we know Mr. Potash won't make any decisions. We could play Carole King because she is Mrs.

Potash's favorite. After we could serve Shirley Temple's at the house to lighten the mood. We could cremate her and return the outfit.

I don't think I like the idea of being burned, Linnie says. We'll do it at Holy Child, and we'll keep it short and sweet.

When we found out the cancer had come back everyone said the Potash's should do something special. Mr. Potash had to work, but Linnie and Mrs. Potash went to Santa Fe where Mrs. Potash always wanted to go. They stayed at a spa and Mrs. Potash drank cactus cocktails, and they brought ones without alcohol for Linnie. A man named Tatonga drove them out to an Indian reservation where the women made leather goods and jewelry and they bought matching turquoise necklaces. Back in Tatonga's silver van Linnie noticed something up in the cottonwood tree.

We put our loved ones up high so nothing interferes with their spirits reaching heaven, Tatonga said. On the last day of the trip the concierge at the spa arranged for Linnie and Mrs. Potash to ride in a hot air balloon with a giant smiley face on top. Linnie spent most the trip scouring the tree tops for more Native American caskets, but she couldn't find any. Linnie told me flying in the hot air balloon at first felt like when you are asleep and you dream that you are falling, but once she got used to it it felt like floating in warm water on your back.

CeeCee has gone home for the night, and Mr. Potash works late, so Linnie and I watch Oprah reruns. I've already seen this one with my mother. Sully

Sullenberger comes on and meets all the survivors that were on the plane when he landed it in the Hudson River. The survivors all hug and cry and one woman falls onto her knees right there on the carpeted stage. I think about how lucky he is that he's the hero who saved a plane full of people, not the maniac who landed a jet in the river.

That guy's amazing, Linnie says, and I watch as she smiles at the screen and shakes her head. I know that when the mother of one of the passengers hugs Sully Sullenberger Linnie will be overwhelmed. Sure enough, Linnie punches a clenched fist to her chest and gasps.

I am seeing a therapist now because my parents are worried. I told my mother I had a dream that I died, but I didn't die in the dream because I learned in science class that this is impossible. But I was dead, backstage at the Piedmont Theater, and all of a sudden the red curtains parted and a booming voice announced my name. Everyone I had ever known who died was there and they all stood and clapped. My therapist asks me what I think this means about my views on death, and I tell her I don't know. My therapist says this is interesting. She asks me if I believe in heaven or hell or reincarnation. I tell her I don't know what to believe.

Outside we can hear the scratch of roller skates on pavement as the neighborhood kids play a pickup game of hockey in the street. An older boy named Danny Giamatti is dominating the game, thrusting his stick into the cracks of the littler boy's butts as he skates by.

I have half a mind to go outside and tell him to pick on someone his own size, Lennie says. But we both know she'd never do a thing like that.

You know those Chinese lanterns we send off at the block party every year? Lennie says. The ones you light a match under and they just float into the air? I tell her I do.

I wonder where they land, she says.

I think they just kind of disappear, I tell her, and she looks at me and nods with her big exaggerated cartoon eyes.

It's a Wednesday when Mrs. Potash dies. Mr. Potash decides to bury her in a cream suit Lennie calls outdated with a wide lapel that she wore to Lennie's cousin's wedding when she was sick but still healthy enough to dance. Lennie cries so hard Mr. Potash gives in and drapes the cardigan we got with the genuine copper buttons over Mrs. Potash's shoulders. I go with Lennie to see Mrs. Potash one last time. I don't tell Mr. Potash that the suit looks itchy or that the pencil skirt makes her look skinny, and not in a good way.

Lennie gives me the pants and blouse we bought in a brown grocery bag and asks me to bring them back to Giselle's when I can. I go back to the store and return the clothes. In the corner there is a mannequin with no head or hands, all limbs wearing a dress and a belt around her narrow waist. I go up to the register and the same saleswoman stands waiting.

Didn't work out? she says, pulling the blouse and trousers out of the paper bag.

We just decided on the cardigan, I say. The woman holds the pants and then the blouse up and looks them over before scanning the red laser over each tag.

Right, I remember now, she says. You were in with that pretty young lady and you bought that nice salmon sweater with the copper buttons.

I nod. I don't tell her that a thousand years from now when we are like dinosaurs and someone decides to dig Mrs. Potash up that is all they will find. Hair, dust, copper buttons.

“Transference”

I sit on the couch with my knuckles in my mouth and watch. A young woman in a black tunic and black pants swings from the window ledge. She has climbed out the window of the theater, and she looks down the street toward the red flashing sirens, cheek pressed to the brick wall. Every few seconds she swings her legs right and left, the movement more steady than stillness. When she adjusts her white-fingered grip on the ledge I lean in toward the television. I'm sure she's going to fall, by god she's going to fall, but she centers herself, pulling her knees into her chest in a vertical sit-up. She continues to hang.

The sound of the apartment door causes me to jump and my pulse to beat in my gums. I quickly place my palms on the couch and breathe in slowly through my nose, slowing my heart so the movement does not transfer through the television waves, across the Atlantic and through the narrow Parisian streets, and shake the hanging woman. My husband comes around the corner and stands beside the TV. Without moving my head I glance in his direction. His neck is flushed red from the autumn air.

What's the matter, he asks, and I point to the television. In the forty minutes my husband has been on the subway riding home from work the world has shifted again. His ignorance of the shift startles me. Commuters rattle on over the Brooklyn Bridge uninterrupted. People bake lasagnas and do algebra homework and sleep on their sides. Not everyone is perched on their couches

begging that the woman hang on just a little bit longer because, surely, help is on the way.

A news anchor now stands beside a teenaged girl in dark eyeliner and a black and white striped clingy t-shirt. A young man with ruffled hair and acne an arms-length away from the girl looks past the camera and occasionally at the ground. Behind them the theater glows red. There are still people inside.

What first went through your mind when you heard gunshots? the news anchor asks.

The teenage girl picks at some skin on her thumb and then looks up.

I just thought, it's happening, she says.

And it's just that. It's the familiarity of the scene that makes it most terrifying. The people running down the street, ducking behind garbage cans when they hear the popping of the machine gun start again. The police in rows of face shields and arm shields and chest shields marching toward the popping. The white sheets that do little to conceal the gruesome truth of what they cover. I do not think, what is happening? I do not think, how did that plane fly so off course? Instead I think, here we go again. It's happening. Tomorrow flowers and candles and photographs on the sidewalks; then crying people holding up photocopied images of the missing; then people being just a little more kind to one another; then breaking news interruptions; then people looking at one another with suspicion on the subway; then politicians telling us we must stand with one another; then politicians screaming at one another; then politicians blaming one another; then politicians pledging to find and punish the perpetrators; then maybe,

if a few weeks later we're still feeling scared, politicians declaring war just to have something to do.

The camera cuts back to the hanging woman. A man has climbed out a window on the floor above her, and his feet dangle a few feet from her suspended head. The man looks down toward the woman and the hanging woman looks up toward the man, and I wonder if they are exchanging words the news cameras cannot hear. My husband has gone to the bedroom to change out of his work clothes. If I watch the woman she will not fall. If I keep my muscles tense her fingers won't give out. The camera zooms in and tries to catch a shot of her face, and at that moment a body inside the building, merely a dark shadow, approaches the window she's climbed from.

It's happening, I think. This woman is going to be killed on television. This dark shadow is going to slowly peel her fingers one by one from the ledge, and then go upstairs for the man. The shadow solidifies into a body leaning out the window. He looks down at the woman and says something. He disappears back into the building, because, it seems, he has decided the woman is safer hanging from the window ledge than going back inside. The camera has pivoted revealing a side angle of the woman and the man, ambulances below lining the narrow block.

My husband comes out of the bedroom and stands behind the couch. He puts his cold hands on my shoulders and squeezes. I momentarily let my head rest against his stomach and stop trying to prevent my thoughts from slipping into my mind's darker crevices. If I were inside the theater when the shooting started

would I run upstairs and climb out a window? Would I feel safer there? Would I take comfort in knowing that if I let go and plummeted to my death, at least I would be the one doing the killing?

You okay? my husband says.

I think she's pregnant, I say.

I didn't want to go. When I stood up from the couch my legs felt sandy with sleep and nearly buckled beneath me. But we're at Percy's on 13<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue A because an undefeated UFC fighter is slated to defend her belt. I have never been interested in UFC fighting or heard of the defending champion, but telling my husband I'd rather stay home and watch a woman hang from a window ledge feels wrong. Also, I'm scared to be alone.

Downtown twenty-somethings in denim and leather huddle inside Percy's. Flat screen televisions mount every wall in the bar, and more suspend from the ceiling. The blue of the screens make the fresh young faces glow sickly. I get a stool and sit with my purse between my knees and my eyes on the door. Music plays and the televisions are turned up loud, and I can't discern between the cheering in the bar and the cheering in the televised arena. This would be the perfect target, hundreds of unsuspecting people distracted by the TVs, sloppy and slow from too much cheap beer. An overweight bouncer in a black V-neck and jeans with red stitching checks IDs halfheartedly with one eye on the television screen.

Two women with braided hair and wrapped fists bounce around in silky, thick, waist-banded shorts and sports bras. They're the lightweight pre-show, the Featherweight fighters, though there's nothing soft about them. One fighter, an eastern European looking woman with yellow hair smears Vaseline on her cheeks. My husband leans his mouth to my ear, and I can smell his whiskey as he speaks.

The Vaseline makes her skin less likely to tear, he says, and I nod silently. She slides her mouth guard in and pulls her hood on, looking more like the grim reaper than a 120-pound woman, and the bar gets louder with anticipation. The bells ring and the bar quiets, mouths open, eyes on the screen. A man in a denim jacket bobs from side to side dodging the virtual punches, inhaling sharply with each punch he escapes. My husband squeezes my arm when one woman's lip begins to bleed, but I hardly notice. Every time the door opens and the cold air sneaks in, I turn and scan for masks or guns or bombs. But it's just another mildly drunk person, relieved to have found a bar showing the fight in time to watch the undefeated champion. The fighter with the Vaseline hits the mat. The crowd oohs in sympathy, and the bell sounds three times. When the referee pulls her to her feet to declare her opponent the champion, her knees buckle beneath her feather weight.

The blood and Vaseline and saliva are wiped from the ring. The spectators in the bar refill their beers. A man in a suit buys shots for a group of girls celebrating a friend's twenty-first birthday. The birthday girl stands up on the stool revealing her pink birthday sash and takes the shot, leaning her head back to reveal her milky white throat. Long after the fight should have begun, the

champion, the one they are waiting for, finally makes her way through the tunnel of fans toward the ring. People around me take bets on how long her opponent will last. Their bets are made in seconds. She's gotten famous for taking down her opponents with an arm bar, her signature move designed to dislocate her challenger's elbow. It's assumed she'll do the same tonight.

The two women spar a bit, for long enough that people around me bemoan their lost bets. Finally, her opponent kicks the champion in the face, and the high definition televisions capture the spit flying out of her mouth as her eyes roll back and she hits the mat. The crowd can't believe what is happening, shocked into momentary silence by the powerful champion flat on her back. One man slams his beer bottle down so hard on the table that it shatters. I close my eyes and think, by god, it's happening. The bar lets out a communal groan and then goes wild as the woman who dethroned our champion raises her arm toward the ceiling in victory. I open my eyes and exhale in relief.

I wonder if they saved the woman, I say.

Oh she'll be fine, my husband says. They're professionals.

On a cool dewy morning I walk my dog west on 21<sup>st</sup> street, focused on trying to prevent him from eating the discarded pizza slices, apple cores, newspapers, and plastic bags from the corner bodega that litter the block. It's the time of day when I feel most at home in New York City as I wave and say good morning to fellow dog walkers. I witness people going about their same morning rituals on these walks; the father who walks across 21<sup>st</sup> street with his two children, and then

stops to wave at their mother who is looking out their fourth-story window; the super who manages the building next to ours and hoses off the sidewalk, cleansing it of garbage and dog crap and leaves; the crossing guard in her giant reflective aviator sunglasses greeting everyone by name as she patrols the block that, during the school week, is closed to traffic.

A taxi driver leans on his horn and a teenage boy on a skateboard rolls by, his wheels leaving parallel black streaks on the asphalt in his wake. As I turn for home, a screech pierces the air, and I squeeze the leash and scan the street in a panicked search for the source. I see the girls and release my grip. Across the street in front of PS 11, three girls shriek in that way only elementary school girls know how; shrieks of complete joy tinged with the excitement of knowing that it will not be acceptable in a few short years, but for now, they can get away with it. I sit on the stoop of an apartment building across the street from the school and watch the girls talking to one another in a huddle. When they break, they arrange themselves in a straight line in the middle of the sidewalk. In their formation they struggle to hold still, giggling and digging their elbows into one another and tripping over their own overgrown feet. I shift on the stoop, the cement damp through the seat of my jeans. A man walks down the block, eating a breakfast sandwich, and when he gets within a couple feet of the girls they begin to scream. *Stranger danger, stranger danger*, and they run up the stairs of PS 11, taking refuge in front of the school's bright blue painted doors.

By the time the girls repeat this for the third time on an unsuspecting passerby, I've figured out the rules for their game. The tallest girl with the black

braid snaking into her pink hood and the neon sneakers gets to stand at the front of the line every time. Between rounds they gather around her and she relishes their attention, speaking animatedly and waving her arms in the lavender morning air.

Don't do stranger danger if the person has a kid with them, I imagine her saying. And don't do it on anyone too close to our age. If a woman is walking a dog she is not a stranger danger. And neither is anyone too fat to chase us.

A middle aged-man with a felt fedora and a slight shuffle to his step approaches the section of the sidewalk the girls patrol. He is childless and slender. When the girls scream and run he puts his hands up in front of his trench-coated body, palms out, the universal symbol for *I mean no harm*. They continue to run and he looks around self-consciously before shrugging his shoulders and continuing on toward the subway. The game makes me nostalgic. Even the term *stranger danger*, has the quaintness of poorly produced grainy films shown on the VCR to elementary school kids in which sandy haired men in acid wash jeans lure children over to pet their dogs, give children candy spiked with Ricin, and offer children rides home in the warmth of their Toyota.

A little girl sits on a park bench as her friends race across the monkey bars and swing upside down hanging from their knees. She cannot yet explain to them the fear of heights she's had ever since she can remember. The way tall buildings make her upper lip sweat. Doesn't yet understand the transference of fear. At ten, she's a cautious child moving through the world with deliberate steps who prefers

to sit in the cafeteria with her back to a wall, to the amusement of the other little girls. She cannot explain why sometimes her mother seems to hold her a little too long when she leaves the apartment for school, squeezes her hand so hard it hurts when they watch fireworks on vacation. Twelve years from now when her mother decides it's time the girl knows, she will sit on the couch with her knuckles in her mouth and will watch as her mother hangs from a window ledge, her mother's rounded belly, full of her, pressed up against brick. On the playground of a Parisian school on a cool dewy morning, a group of girls will count *un, deux, trois, quatre*, as their friends try to hang on to the monkey bars for just one second longer, shrieking in that way only girls of a certain age can.

“Phototaxis”

Before the beachfront residents learned to turn off their lights, there they'd be—dehydrated, dead beneath their decks, smashed flat on the scalding highway from the impact of a beach-bound car, flipped on their backs helpless in the grassy stretch dividing highway from home. Misguided by artificial light. Lost at land. Now Florida residents know better; their homes stay cloaked in darkness during nesting season.

The little girl stands in front her parents on the beach in the black of night, waiting. She's never been so close to the ocean at night, close enough to see it like this: the water, purple velvet under the moon. The damp air soothes her. A blockade of salty kelp and dried sea oats separates the girl and her parents from the open stretch of sand. In the darkness and the silence and the blue moonlight, the beach looks like the surface of a far off planet the little girl has seen in her father's leather bound encyclopedia. Or maybe the picture was of the moon, she can't be sure. But she's certain it doesn't look like earth.

The rough diamond-backed shell slowly breaks the smooth water and surfaces like a glistening submarine—bigger than the little girl imagined, but just as slow. The turtle looks out of place on land, a foreigner exploring new territory, its limping gait so different from the grace of its underwater stroke. The turtle's four feet recognize these familiar sands; sands she hasn't felt since they first

imprinted on her pads twenty-two years ago. Should a beachfront resident forget and momentarily snap on their bedroom light, tired of searching for their reading glasses in the dark, the turtle could be misled over the tangled barrier right onto the little girl's feet. Or so the little girl worries. Her mother places a warm hand on the small space between her shoulder blades, calm seeping through the little girl's orange wind breaker.

The beach stays dark and the turtle crawls toward a shadow cast by the kelp wall. A turtle instinct different from the human's: darkness means safety, light the threat. The little girl takes a step back, sits down on the sand, its coolness penetrating the denim seat of her shorts. She leans the small of her back against her father's standing shins. Her face levels with the turtle's. The scales on the turtle's head look like amber and black mosaic tiles; her rough skin two sizes too big, shriveling in places, taut in others, like a birthday balloon left to die a natural death. The little girl thinks the turtle looks afraid, watches as the turtle scans her slitted marble eyes from side to side.

In the bathtub? the man asks.

Yes, in the bathtub, she says. And stop looking at me like that.

The woman wants the birth to be natural. Wants her unborn child to enter into a world of warmth and calm, not sterility and fear.

Babies inherit fear, she tells her husband. I read it. It's true. This wall between us, she says, rubbing her hands on her belly. It's not so thick.

The man trusts his wife's instincts on all things related to their unborn child. She told him the baby can hear them talk, and so for months he sings to the baby while his wife naps, hopeful his voice will become familiar. But he still worries that the baby will drown, does not understand that the baby has been living in fluid for the last nine months, that babies are aquatic animals whose lungs don't know air until they reach it. He keeps his fears to himself.

At night they rest their heads on a single pillow and clutch one another as they float into their own unspoken anxieties. She dreams of her abdomen ripping open. Of her doctor sticking a gleaming syringe into her belly until she pops, deflating instantly beneath her polka dotted maternity blouse. Unable to sleep he wraps his arms around her, pressing the pads of his thick fingers gently on the globe of her growing belly and hoping the wall separating their baby from his panic is thicker than his wife believes.

In her seventh month the midwife comes over carrying an aqua tote bag filled with iridescent inflatable pillows of varying sizes, and a pair of oversized foamy headphones covered in a thin waterproof plastic. The woman guides her to their apartment's only bathroom, a small room with yellow tiles and a yellow tub. The midwife pulls a medium sized pillow out of her bag and blows short confident breaths until the oval takes shape. She sets it on the floor beneath her knees and runs her hands along the rim of the tub. The woman sits on the lid of the toilet, her belly nestled between her swollen legs, watching.

No, this won't work, the midwife says shaking her head. The bathtub in their rental apartment is too small for a water birth. A woman must not feel

restricted during birth, the midwife explains. Her body needs room to explore water and space. The woman's heart begins to beat, and she tries to calm it before the baby notices.

Over the next few days the idea of passing on fear to her baby pulses so loudly in the woman's brain that she sends her husband out in search of a solution. He drives around Miami in his pickup aimlessly for forty-five minutes, panicking in safe distance of the baby. He returns to the apartment with a royal blue plastic baby pool with molten orange starfish and pine green turtles dancing across the bottom. The woman cries. At first he is unsure what the tears mean, but she wraps her arms around his neck, their baby hard against his stomach. They set the pool up on the rippled linoleum of the kitchen. They pace. They test for ideal water temperatures. She practices squatting in the birthing position the midwife taught her. They wait.

If a turtle makes a snow angel in the sand, is it a sand angel? This the little girl wonders as she watches the turtle flap her arced flippers in hurried strokes a few feet away. The longer the turtle digs the darker the sand. When she sinks below the sight line, the turtle readjusts her body and starts digging a smaller, deeper hole that descends into blackness. Using her back flippers, she scoops right and left, flipping damp sand until her half-moon flippers can reach no deeper. She repositions herself so the rear edge of her shell hangs over this deeper hole, and lowers her head to the sand; a creature seizing the calm for a moment of prayer.

The little girl waits for eggs. She digs her toe through the dry sand to the wet until she hits something solid and foreign and she quickly tucks her leg back under her behind. She pulls at the coarse black hairs that cover her father's legs, lightly at first, but hard enough and he swats her head gently with his thick fingers. She thinks she'd be scared to swim in the dark here, in this ocean, but she wonders if this thick velvety water would feel different on her bare legs.

The turtle's back flippers begin to twitch, and she thrusts forward onto the top of her head, her backside elevating off the sand. Four eggs fall first; not the familiar oval but instead four perfectly round eggs, like ping pong balls, bright white and glossed with fluid. The little girl braces for the crack and covers her ears, imagines raw yolk sliding into a frying pan on a Sunday morning, but instead only a light thump reverberates through the soles of her feet as the eggs land on the deep dark sand. The little girl counts each thud silently until the mother turtle moves her body in front of the hole, revealing the one hundred and four eggs—the chamber brimming. Beneath the shell does the turtle's abdomen suddenly feels loose, no longer pressed so tightly between the hardness?

The man's knees ache from kneeling on the kitchen floor, but he doesn't dare get up to retrieve a pillow from the couch. The rain sounds more like gravel than water hitting the kitchen windows, and without the buzz of the refrigerator, the sound amplifies, echoing off the linoleum floors. The midwife calls from forty minutes away, stranded in her own dark home. She delivers instructions he can

barely comprehend. His wife will break in half. His reflexes will betray him in his only role. The rippling sagging floor of their decaying kitchen will give in beneath the weight of the baby pool and they will plummet three stories and land in the dank basement. At this moment he is grateful to not be the keeper of this baby. Grateful the tube directly funneling into their unborn child does not attach to him.

He offers to rub her shoulders. He offers to rub her swollen feet. He offers to run out and get the grape popsicles she's craved with an alarming intensity for seven months, though they both know he couldn't drive on these roads.

I'm fine, she tells him. In developing countries, people don't take birth so seriously. Women come inside when they feel labor pains, deliver their babies squatting on mud floors, and return to their work.

We're not in a developing country, he reminds her. She presses a wet finger to his lips.

They had not considered that the water would get cold in the hours before labor. The man tests the taps and finds that warm water still flows. The woman cannot get out of the pool and so the man frantically fills the large aqua ceramic bowl they got for their wedding with the cold water, dumping it in the sink until only a few inches remain, and refilling the tub bowl by bowl with warm. When contractions come she thrusts her head forward between her knees and howls. In between contractions they look through old issues of *National Geographic* using the giant red flashlight. The landscapes soothe her.

Flip a turtle on its back and it has fifteen seconds to live, he reads aloud. She runs her fingers over the surface of the water and closes her eyes.

Flip me on my stomach and I think I'd have about the same.

The turtle uses her flippers to cover the egg chamber with sand, a renewed energy for this creature that has shed one hundred and four lives. When sand completely covers the hole, she rubs the underside of her shell atop it, smoothing a packed seal. She turns to face the tunnel of moon reflecting off the ocean, mirrored in two white semicircles off the black of her eyes. Moving toward the water, she flicks dry surface sand behind her until the chamber of eggs blends completely in to the surrounding beach. No evidence of her evening's work; a thankless job for this hard-shelled creature.

She pauses ten feet from the masked hole and digs another, half the depth of the first. This hole she refills without care, the messy dark crater visible to even the little girl. She moves another ten feet toward the water and repeats the act, a second hole. Trick holes, meant to fool predators into frustration and resignation. And then the mother turtle slips back into the silver ocean. The little girl and her parents walk across the beach toward the parking lot, still silent, though the turtle is long gone. The little girl scrapes her sandy feet on the rough asphalt and then climbs into the warmth of the minivan. The lingering brine of wet swimsuits still fills the air.

Three boys spend two hours building a sandcastle with a hexagon moat, and then smash it with the flat side of their plastic shovels. Beneath, the turtle eggs sit in their camouflaged hole. A woman lays her towel down atop their

underground fortress, ignorant to the one hundred and four incubating lives beneath. A little girl loses one of her front teeth and bleeds into her pink striped beach towel. Eight weeks pass and one brave turtle begins to shake in her shell, awaking the others, until the egg chamber vibrates with the energy of new life. The eggs suddenly suffocate instead of protect, and the turtles punch at the thin luminous walls. They climb frantically toward the light, crushing the ping-pong orbs that once housed them under their newly formed feet.

Preparing for battle, the hatchlings wait until nighttime. They know to take on the most dangerous journey of their lives under the blanket of a dark sky. The sun sets and they begin. One hundred and four baby turtles climb atop one another and ramble their way onto the beach. Covered in sand they emerge from the chamber, their newborn eyes searching for light. A few stumble while emerging from the hole, flipping onto their backs and unable to right themselves. The other continuing moving across the open stretch of beach, the sands imprinting on the smooth pads of their newborn feet. One baby can't keep up with the pack and they leave him behind. Three feet from the safety of water, nine turtles are scooped up by a small group of seagulls. The remaining, guided by the earth's magnetic pull and an instinct buried deep under their tiny dinosaur shells and scaled skin, move toward the brightest light, the open horizon— and slip into the tunnel of moonlight on ocean.

The man is rubbing the woman's feet as she braces herself against the edges of the pool. When it first appears, white and glistening the man nearly

faints. Then he sees: this is the baby's head. Smooth and paler than he imagined, though just as small. From there the baby moves quickly until her entire body is free from the moaning woman. All goes silent for a moment, the woman's head dangling over the edge of the pool, the baby floating calmly in the murky water. The man plunges his hands beneath the surface and lifts the baby toward his chest. A sharp inhale he can feel through his shirt; the baby squeezes the tiny slits of her eyes closed against the harsh light of the kitchen; the baby's gasps turn into cries. The mother clutches the baby to her chest and weeps. The lights flash three times and turn on. All three squint their eyes against the brightness.

The man steers the minivan down the dark highway lane. The sound of the air coming in through the open windows lulls the girl to sleep. She dreams she's in the middle of a calm ocean floating on her back, the tide pulling her where it wishes. Far from the shore she sees nothing but water and stars and sky. She pushes her hands down into the depths that stretch beneath her and feels the water get colder. Her hands float back toward the surface, pulled by an invisible force toward her bare thighs. She feels no fear in the middle of the ocean on this dreamy swim, feels at home in the limitless water. Above, the moon divides into two even half pies that nose-dive toward the water before reuniting, a perfect circle rising back up, a perfect sky.

The waters, moments ago calm and uninterrupted, begin to tremble, and the little girl feels a tug at the center of her head. At first she thinks this is the tide swaying her ponytail along the water's surface, but the tugging intensifies until it

forces her chin straight up toward the sky. Her forehead breaks the ocean's silky black surface, then her eyes and cheeks and lips submerge. Her back arches, the tips of her toes momentarily kissed by the moonlight, before she begins hurtling head first toward the ocean floor. The water gets colder the deeper she plunges, but the little girl feels no fear, she only wonders how deep this ocean goes. The flesh curtain of her closed eyelids begins to lighten, black to brown to a bright, molten orange. A booming sound she can feel in her teeth leaves her organs vibrating; the little girl feels no fear; warm fingers clutch her shoulders and pull; the light bright white through closed eyes; the tiny balloons inside her chest inflate; the little girl is not afraid; her body fills with cold.

The Jeep is speeding down I-4 as it sideswipes the minivan, sending it sideways into the cement highway divider. The little girl's sleeping head whips from the window where it rested and boomerangs back into the glass with a knock that reverberates through the upholstered roof. She hears the sound of crushed metal first, then feels the seatbelt digging into the silver button of her denim shorts, indenting into her soft belly. They're going to flip, by god she thinks, they're going to flip. She thrusts her head between her knees and her palms onto the back of the driver's seat, bracing for impact. She closes her eyes again, wishes she could return to that dream swim. Glass shatters on asphalt. Airborne, the mother's airbag detonates. Roof is floor and floor is roof and the little girl dangles. The car comes to a stop but still rocks. The mother takes off her seatbelt and crawls into the backseat. Wrapping the little girl in her arms she releases her

seatbelt, presses the side of her head into her palm and runs her fingers through the little girl's wet, red, sandy brown hair. The car steadies.

The van emits no light, and the family sits inside its crushed shell as other cars on their way to late night gatherings speed by. One driver seems to spot them on the side of the road, flashes his lights three times after he passes, but help does not come. The family is still an hour's drive from their motel in Jupiter. The father pulls himself through the smashed windshield, out of the car and up on top of it. Under his weight, the metal and plastic strain. The mother holds her arm and tells the little girl to stay put. Between the two wheels, the father jumps up and down and waves his arms toward the sky, begging someone to notice his flailing body in the tunnel of their headlights. Begging someone to stop and help. Finally, he swings his legs through the open door and joins his family in the car.

The ringing in the little girl's ears stops, and she closes her eyes. Her ocean dream flashes by. In the front seat, the mother and father argue in whispers they think the little girl cannot hear.

The longer we sit here, the more likely we'll get hit, he says,

You can't just walk into the middle of a highway, she says.

The mother cries but in the rearview mirror she sees the little girl, methodically picking at the sand between her toes. She calms herself for her. In the backseat they watch through the window. Watch the father walks slowly across the silver moonlight highway, eyes on the four lanes to his right. In the dark he's a shadow straddling two middle lanes, waiting for light to illuminate his body.

A white convertible surfaces on the horizon. The headlights bathe the father in bright particles of floating light. The car comes so fast the father might be flattened on his back in the middle of this four-lane highway. But then the driver flashes his lights two times, and, turning on his signal, begins to slowly shift the car across the lanes toward the divider. The little girl cheers. The man driving the car is old and tanned, his forehead like leather horse saddle, and a strip of loose skin connects his chin to his throat. He will stop at the oasis a few miles up and call the police.

They wait. The little girl climbs into the trunk of the car, and the mother opens the trunk door for her, letting in the humid breeze. The air feels heavy and salty on her bare legs, and she curls around herself, one arm protectively shielding her tiny head. Through the gap between arm and head, the little girl stares up at the inky sky.

We can never see this many stars at home, she thinks.

She squeezes her knees into her chest and closes her eyes, trying to feel the pull of the earth's magnetic field.

“Mutation”

Lucy scratches her nails against the front door. The sound summons me from the basement laundry room, my hands damp and raw red from the cold rinse cycle. Rounding the corner of the basement stairwell there she stands. On back legs, completely vertical and still, with the comfort of a two-legged creature. I’m terrified at first—who is this longhaired panting freak of a beast at the front door—but then she lowers her front legs and chases her tail in three frantic circles, and I recognize my gentle Labrador.

I walk on the curb, heel to toe heel to toe. Lucy rubs her leathery nose against each tree we pass. She squats low on her hind legs to relieve herself, kicking at the grass when she’s finished.

A woman and her daughter stand on their front lawn at the end of the block. A large oak tree hangs over the driveway. The little girl squats down, barefoot and concentrated, while the mother talks into her cell phone.

Mom, the little girl says. Mom. But the mother does not respond. She leaves the little girl and goes to sit on the front stoop, groaning as she lowers herself onto the step. As we walk by the little girl waves with one hand while carefully balancing the other. I wave back.

Want to see? she says. I glance over at the mother, still on her phone, and walk to the girl. The damp grass seeps through my canvas shoes and wets my toes. The little girl stands perfectly still, one hand cupped, domelike, over the

other. She pulls her hand away to reveal three sky-blue eggs the size of Christmas lights resting in her palm.

Robin's eggs, I say. Did you see a nest?

No. And the landscaper found the mother dead. She runs her index finger gently over the eggs' surfaces. Lucy tugs at her leash, and the little girl takes a worried step back. We walk back toward home.

At the end of our driveway I unclip Lucy's leash, and she runs to the front door. She licks the glass with her sandpaper tongue. It's then that I see it. In the center of the lawn, catching the light and reflecting. Another egg, I think, but when I squat down and trace my finger over the object, it's fuzzy and soft—a mushroom, perfectly circular, tucked into the damp grass. Lucy slaps her paw against the glass of the front door. I go to let her inside.

The doctor calls it *Tinnitus*. My mother calls it a ringing in her head that won't stop. In your ears you mean, he says. No, she insists. In my head. Still, she presses her ears flat against her head in an instinctual move to try and make the sound stop.

The day after her doctor's appointment, I am standing in the line at the post office when my cell phone rings. It's my mother on the line, her voice sounding like she's gargling saliva. She's fallen down the stairs. I pull into her driveway and she's sitting on the porch in her white wicker rocking chair, staring up toward the sky.

Mom, I say. She glances down. I walk her to my car. An eggplant bruise blooms on her forearm.

I was walking to the bathroom to brush my teeth and I slipped, she says. She's looking out the window, into her lap, straight ahead.

From your bedroom? I ask. She nods as I reverse out the cracked driveway and turn left toward the hospital. The bathroom is at the opposite end of the hall from the staircase, I say. She looks at me with bowl-shaped eyes and begins to shake.

In the curtained hospital room my mother looks like a paper doll in a blue paper gown. The snow haired doctor comes in. Without introducing himself he begins to poke my mother. He shines a tiny flashlight in each of my mother's wet eyes and watches as her amber pupils expand and shrink, expand and shrink. He asks her to close her eyes and touch her nose. He has her walk across the curtained room, placing each foot directly in front of the other, heel to toe, heel to toe. My mother sticks her arms out at her sides like a circus performer scaling a tightrope. Her path, a sharp diagonal toward the door. I stare at the doctor's face, searching for a clue. He jots something down in his miniature notebook. He buzzes for the nurse.

A nurse in navy blue scrubs with tattoos lacing his lower arms and fanning out onto his hands pushes my mother in a wheelchair toward the scanning room. A giant red sign warns of danger in bold letters. Strong magnetic field. Magnet is always on. A horseshoe magnet with lightening bolts coming out of each end.

Through the viewing window I watch the tattooed nurse drape my mother in a thin blanket and place blue plastic pillows alongside either side of her head. He leaves the room and with the push of a button I watch as my mother is fed into the magnetic cave.

What music would you like to listen to ma'am? the nurse says into a small microphone. When she doesn't respond he shrugs, puts on the Beach Boys, and turns on the machine. The entire room begins to vibrate, and I can feel the linoleum pulsating through the soles of my sneakers. I close my eyes and try to feel my molecules and atoms realigning while the magnets burrow through my mother's hair, skin, flesh, skull and straight into her brain.

In the lavender of the early morning light we walk down the center of the street. Mushrooms polka dot the neatly mowed lawns, their off white and brown tops bulbous and persistent. In the weeks since I spotted the first lone mushroom on my lawn, they've multiplied. The lawn of the house on the corner where the little girl found the robin's eggs has surrendered fully to the creatures. While the other lawns have dirtied white speckling the grass, this lawn glows fluorescent white with barely visible patches of green in the spaces between.

The silent street is littered with dehydrated leaves, and Lucy pulls toward the lawns. One block of yanks on the leash and she's learned, this four-legged creature who can only follow basic commands yet has internalized the desire to avoid discomfort. Still, I pull her further into the middle of the street so she won't be tempted. Together we hunt for the darkened glisten of another dog's urine. It

triggers my poor babe to go, helps take the place of the trees not long ago she circled before lifting a leg. When the lawns were safe. Before the mushrooms invaded. When she's finished, we enter the house through the garage. Better safe than sorry.

My mother and I sit in two matching velvet chairs in the grey-carpeted office facing the white haired doctor at his desk. My mother grips the curved wooden arms of the chair so tightly it seems she's afraid if she loosens her grip she might tip right onto the plush carpet. Her long bony fingers fade white under the pressure. Pianist fingers, she used to say when I'd hold my own stubby fingers up alongside hers.

Across the desk the doctor leans back in his chair and taps his index finger against his temple.

Three moon-shaped canals make up the inner ear, he says. Each lined with a blanket of tiny hairs and filled with fluid. When the head moves, the fluid moves, like water in a bowl being tipped on its side. When the hairs get wet, they act like sensors, sending nerve impulses to the brain that signal rotation.

The doctor looks at us, satisfied with his explanation. We are moving, I imagine the damp hairs whispering to the brain. We are still.

And I don't have any hairs? my mother says. My moon canals are prematurely bald? She's smiling but I see she's let go of her grip on the chair and has pulled the flesh alongside her thumbnail down, a pinprick of blood pooling at the base of her nail.

It's not the hairs, the doctor says. He holds the thick plastic paper to the light. My mother's brain glows back. Snuggled on the right side a white mass the shape of a strawberry stands out against the gray. He points to it.

It's their ability to transmit messages, he says. Think of it like this. The tumor has cut the telephone wire.

On the drive home my mother runs her tongue over her thumb to stop the bleeding. She opens her mouth a few times, I can see in the reflection of the windshield, but she doesn't speak. I picture crescent-shaped ear beaches with low tides. The sand dark and smooth when the water recedes.

Tinnitus. Tumor. Telephone wires. An inability to orient. A loss of spatial recognition.

How did this happen, I say. Where did it come from? What's the cause? The doctor removes his glasses and rubs the lenses against the sleeve of his sweater.

Anything can cause it, he says. One microscopic cell begins to mutate, and if it has enough energy, a tumor grows.

The doctor calls it a *craniotomy*. High risk, though the best option she's got. I call it drilling a hole through the white petrified skull bone of my mother in order to cut out the strawberry shaped mass that will mutate if let be.

There are mushrooms taking over my lawn, I say. Every day there are more. People have complained, we're worried they're toxic. But they just keep spreading.

We had those in the backyard growing up, she says. They're persistent. Not much you can do but wait it out. She tells me the mushrooms create their own wind in order to spread their spores and multiply.

Can you imagine the power, she says? I drop my mom off at the house I grew up in. She insists I not walk her in. I sit in the driveway to make sure she can navigate her way to the front door.

My best friend, Josie, waits for me on the stoop, *Grand Thai* bags slung on each arm and an amber bottle of Canadian Club glowing in her small hand. I let her in the front door and leash up Lucy, wrapping the leather around my wrist twice. Gone are the days of holding open the screen door for her to run free, returning empty bladdered and fresh aired. But she understands. At least that's what I imagine she's telling me when she gazes up with her marble-eyed stare.

A neighbor hasn't cleaned up after her dog at the end of my driveway. The scent triggers Lucy's bowels. At the mailbox she squats low, the wooden rooster oblivious to the desecration. I pick up both the foreign and familiar waste with my plastic bagged hand and head back inside. Josie sits on the steps waiting. I snap at Lucy, and she obeys my sit command. Straddled between my legs I pry her mouth open with one hand, gently sweeping my index and middle finger along the smoother of her inner cheeks and the ridged roof of her mouth, jabbing at the vulnerable pink flesh beneath her tongue.

All clear, I say, raising my hands in front of me, free of mushrooms.

Jesus, Josie says. Are you even sure they're toxic? I roll my eyes.

In the living room Josie arranges the grease-stained takeout cartons in order of size on the wood coffee table. She sits on the floor with her long shins pulled under her behind.

How's your mom? she says.

I tell her how when I was four, we moved from an ugly peach apartment building to the ranch house my mom lives in now. I cried because the new house didn't have a parking lot, and I had practiced my skating every day in that lot. But then my mom drove me to the house and took me on a tour. She pretended she was the realtor, citing square footage and lot size and electrical bills. I was unimpressed until we got to the kitchen. There was a built in booth, red vinyl like you used to see in diners. And I remember thinking, we've made it.

All because of a booth? Josie says.

I tell her how I'd be in bed in the summer with the windows open and how I could hear the electricity from the wires that ran right over the house. How the tiny blonde hairs on my arms would stand up, alive with vibration, charged. How when my mother wanted to downsize a few years ago, she couldn't sell it. How the electrical wires scared the young buyers with children away. All that power, moving through the air, invisible.

Josie pauses, a slimy yellow bamboo shoot balanced between her chopsticks.

They ran directly over your house? she says. The house your mother is still in? I nod and Josie places a small hand over her greasy mouth.

Neon pink flags outline all the lawns on my street. The air smells like burning leaves and ammonia. When I open the door to take Lucy out, a pink flyer is taped to the glass of the front door. I step on to the porch to read it. Bold black letters warn residents of the fungicide spraying that took place while we slept. The mushrooms are, in fact toxic. As is the spray used to treat them. Stay indoors when possible. Remove lawn furniture and toys. Wash anything exposed with soap and water. The air smells of wet grass and harsh plastic.

I call Josie in a panic.

They're poisoning us, I say.

No, she says. They're going to poison the mushrooms.

That night I dream the mushrooms grow so big they swallow my tiny brick bungalow and me and Lucy along with it. The food runs out and Lucy and I are still trapped inside the mushroom engulfed house. A panicking woman and her dog inside a room inside a house inside a mushroom. I open the door and scoop handfuls of mushroom flesh frantically onto the floor, but it regenerates at such a fast speed the indentations from my handfuls can barely be seen. We wait, sure the lawn's nutrients will dry up and the mushroom will wither. But the mushroom's growth seems infinite, the small house compressed as the fungus continues to expand. Lucy sits and howls from the depths of her stomach until finally I slide the kitchen windows open and we each take greedy bites out of the spongy walls. We know they are toxic but we are hungry. I have read dying of starvation is the most painful way to die. We sit and wait, trying to discern if the pain spreading through our bodies is from poison or fear.

When I wake, my jaw is sore from clenching. I go to the living room window and try to discern if the mushrooms have grown in the six hours I dreamed.

If this old ticker stops a ticking, my mother says, I want to be burned.

You're not going to die, I say. The hospital machinery buzzes in my molars. Across from the bed underneath the mounted television, a brightly colored bulletin board announces the nurses on duty. *OUR NURSING STAFF IS OUT OF THIS WORLD*. Cut out meticulously from construction paper, beaming nurses circle a perfectly round paper earth.

In the third grade, Mrs. Timson taped a rectangle the same dimensions as a Conestoga wagon to the blue carpeting of our classroom. She broke us kids up into families, and each family got a folder with brightly colored paper cutouts of items we might want to bring on our journey out west—food, clothes, tools, a first aid kit, furniture, toys for the children, extra wagon wheels—all sized to scale. We had to decide as a group what to pack and what to leave behind. After arguing we begged Mrs. Timson to let us bring more. When I got off the bus my cheeks were ruddy with tears.

What happened, my girl? my mother said.

We had to leave so many things behind.

I turn away from the bulletin board and look back toward the bed.

You're not going to die, I say again.

How about a riddle, she says. A woman dies three times. This is not fantasy. She does not have magic powers. This is real life. My mother looks at me with damp eyes, excited. We need to talk about the plan. About selling the house and moving her somewhere without stairs, without yard work, without slippery tile floors after the surgery.

Is she reincarnated? I say.

I said this is not fantasy.

Does her heart stop and they revive her?

Nope, she says. I'll give you the first death. The first time she died, she slid on the deck of a large sailboat her friends had rented and slammed the soft of her head against the boat's boom. She was gone before the crew even noticed.

Jesus Mom, I say, but she's tapping her hand against her thin thigh in anticipation.

And the second? I say.

The second time she dies she sinks through the feet of murky ocean, she says. One minute, two minute, five minutes, past the world record of eleven minutes and fifty-four seconds.

And the third? I say.

The third time a shark comes by and eats her limp body off the ocean floor. My mother smiles at me, proud of her riddle. The nurse knocks three times on the wooden door and walks to the foot of the bed. She's holding a rose-pink plastic bowl with a white paper gown and an electric razor inside. She helps my mother sit up and swing her legs over the side of the bed.

Not the most stylish, the nurse says, flipping on the razor with her thumb. But it will grow back fast. She tilts my mother's head to the left and shaves a rectangle clean behind her ear. My mother's scalp shocks me with its white, and tiny gray hairs stick to her chin and cheeks where her tears have wet her skin.

We walk down the center of the street, and Lucy pauses to sniff the black tar that softens in the sunlight. At the end of the block, four girls in matching corduroys and down vests sprawl on the grass of the front lawn, their heads touching one another's, their feet splayed out. As Lucy and I approach, the front door swings open and a copper haired woman in sweatpants and flip flips screams for them to get off the lawn.

They giggle and move to the driveway where two start swinging a jump rope in large arching circles. A third runs in and jumps with her hands on her hips. Lucy pulls toward the sound of the giggling girls, but I keep her at a distance. The girl jumps when the rope is just about to pass under her feet, yes, but she jumps a second time too, when the rope is safely overhead. A smaller jump, a hop really, the toes of her sneakers barely clearing the blacktop, helping her keep rhythm.

The fourth girl stands two feet to the side of the rope, ducking each time it cuts the cool air beside her. The jumping girl moves methodically toward the front of the rope, making room for the other to enter. She moves closer toward the twirling rope each time it hits its highest point, but each time she's about to jump in she backs out. She resigns herself to sitting on the asphalt and counting her friend's jumps.

The sound of Lucy's spit as she chews pulls my attention away from the girls. She's got her head down between her front paws and she's biting at the air. I drop to my knees, the street cold through the denim of my jeans, and pry her jaw open with my fingers. I feel nothing inside her cheeks or under my tongue. Closing my eyes, I thrust my index finger down her throat, tickling the wall that leads down her esophagus. Lucy starts to cough, a raspy guttural cough. The girls have stopped jumping rope and are watching. She walks in small, slow circles, coughing and rubbing the side of her head against the asphalt, until she vomits up white foam.

Inside, I fill Lucy's bowl with fresh water and then go to the garage. I put on my green welly boots and yellow rubber gloves, and I grab the large white bucket I fill with soapy water when I'm cleaning the car. I stomp out onto the lawn and begin grabbing at the mushrooms, digging my fingers into the soft soil and yanking them free from the stem. The bucket fills with mud and white mushrooms and poison coated grass. My back stings from bending forward but I continue to tear at the lawn.

A man in a baseball cap driving a minivan pulls up alongside the curb.

Lady, he yells, but I don't pay attention. Lady, he yells again. You're only making it worse. Pulling the tops off doesn't solve any problems. Their roots are below the surface. They're just going to grow back.

In second grade I convinced my mother to let me get bangs. When I hated them I went crying to my mother with a scissors.

You can't just cut them off honey, she said. They have to grow out.

The next morning when I wake up Lucy is not on the floor in front of my bed, and I don't hear the familiar sound of paws against wood when I descend the stairs. I walk toward the kitchen, warm saliva beading in my cheeks and forcing me to swallow constantly.

Vomit beneath the kitchen table, a pool of clear liquid with a dandelion yellow center.

Josie comes immediately in her boyfriend's navy blue pickup truck. We line the back with old flannel blankets from the garage, stacking the plaid four layers deep. When Josie sees Lucy on her side behind the couch she begins to cry. We try to coax her out first with her leash, then with a rawhide, but Lucy can hardly lift her head to notice our efforts. I wedge myself between couch and wall and slide my hands under Lucy's bottom, while Josie kneels at the edge of the couch and grabs hold of Lucy's collar. On three I push, Josie pulls, and Lucy whimpers. Once she's out, I lift her into my arms like a giant toddler, her head resting on my shoulder, her hind legs wrapped around my waist. My arms burn beneath her weight. Josie runs ahead and opens the front door, and we lower her into the bed of the truck.

The blood work comes back. *High toxicity*, the vet says. Caused by the fungicides or the fungus, anyone's guess. Euthanizing is the only option. Lucy cries on the stainless steel table. The vet asks me if I want to stay in the room while he injects the pentobarbital into Lucy's vein. On the way out, the receptionist tells me her ashes will be ready in two weeks.

The house is quiet without Lucy. I type MUSHROOMS + DEATH into the gray search bar. A video, viewed over a million times, pops up. I click the link and a large image appears. A person covered head to toe in a black body suit with white webbing snaking up the fabric. A woman in California is breeding an infinity mushroom that will feed off the toxins in a human body. Her plan is to sew the spores of these special mushrooms into burial shrouds. The mushrooms will grow large off the deceased human's toxins, leaving a toxin free body to decompose into the earth.

Fig beetles the size of eggs with oval-shaped translucent bodies have been brought in from the west coast in wooden crates to try and accomplish what the fungicides failed. Ten crates worth, to be specific. Energized off the mushrooms they breed fanatically, spreading out across the neighborhood, coating our lawns. When a botanist from the University was called in for a consultation, he diagnosed the mushrooms as mutations resistant to poison. The beetles are known to feed on the mushrooms with an alarming rapidity, a miniature army with a gigantic appetite for danger. When I walk in the early evenings, the street smashed beetles that look like crushed grapes stain the asphalt. At night, I sit in bed with my windows open and listen to the beetles moving across the dried grass, growing fat on poison.

A white bandage wraps my mother's head, smaller than the one she wore in the days immediately after the surgery. It covers the seven inch incision through which the surgeon removed a chunk of my mother's brain. The room she's been moved is bright and airy, a large window looking out over the tops of the oak trees that line the hospital driveway. I sit down in the chair beside the bed and place my hand on the rough sheet beside hers, afraid to wake her. She looks more comfortable than she did yesterday and the days before. Her eyelids spasm with dream and her left foot twitches every couple of minutes. I allow mine to close. I think of the woman at the bottom of the ocean sinking deeper into a bed of sand. I think of mushroom suits for the dead, of the team of scientists teaching infinity mushrooms to feed off human hair and fingernails right now in Northern California. Of the way Lucy's tongue stiffened almost instantly after the pentobarbital hit her veins. Then the nurse from the bulletin board is gently running her index finger along the tops of my knuckles and telling me to go home. Sugar pie, she calls me. Go home, Sugar Pie.