

May 2018

Things from of Old

Kristin Fay

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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THINGS FROM OF OLD

by

kristin fay

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in English

at

The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

May 2018

ABSTRACT

THINGS FROM OF OLD

by

kristin fay

The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2018
Under the Supervision of Professor Liam Callanan

In his 2012 *New York Times* article “Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?,” Paul Elie notes how Christian belief glimpsed in contemporary U.S.-American literary fiction functions in a social or sociohistorical manner within the narratives. If indeed assigned to an individual, the set of beliefs and their development are so difficult to determine, Elie contends, that the character no longer serves as a believer. This story collection responds to that critique and challenge by introducing characters who live out, live with, and live in consequence of their Judæo-Christian faiths. These stories take faith seriously—as the reason for everything to know about the characters in them. Beliefs drive values, attitudes, and behaviors. So here, faith makes a difference in lives, and lives of faith make a difference in the world. Since the stories’ content engages with what it means to be a 21st-century Christian in the global, transcultural, postcolonial Church body, each character must choose the way s/he will follow, all the while losing, surrendering, or assuming spiritual leaders and authorities. It is not their faiths with which they struggle, but with building support networks for their faiths. In addition, the stories’ formal properties engage styles and approaches of Biblical Scriptures; literary modes of speculative fiction, as they are used to pose supernatural motifs; and, genre elements of folktale, as they are used to socialize and inculcate. The purpose of the collection is to elucidate the spiritual expressions and experiences of the characters.

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Introduction

Part I. The Theoretical: Making It Up

This collection of stories engages the *logos* of Greco-Judaic understanding. It preserves the ancient mythological view of the spoken and written word by keeping language powerful and trustworthy. Here, words matter, because matter is words. They embody and participate in beings. Owen Barfield thought “every word carried some implication of the animate” (Carpenter 42, fr. *Poetic Diction*), hinting at how this is possible. Spirit expresses thought by word; word is spirit. Word is sent out with intention to accomplish a purpose and never loses that involvement. The eternal *Logos* reveals Self, diachronically and synchronically, as and by perpetual utterance:

general revelation through creation,
and specific revelation through faith;

divine actions and abstentions;

signs and miracles;

shekinah and dream-visions;

theophanies and *Immanuel*;

tabernacle-temple, and *ruach*
ha'kodesh / *pneuma hagion*;

chokmah / *sophia*, and *theopneustos*
text;

torah, and *basar* / *euaggelion*;

rhema and *graphe*;

master narrative, and prophecy;

preparations and provisions;

promises and covenants;

judgments and deliverances;

angelic messengers, and poetry;

testimonies and dialectics;

songs and sermons;

prayers and callings;

readings, and responses to questions
and challenges;

parables and literary conventions.

Dialogic in substance and nature, the *Logos* never ceases conversing and remains responsive to conversing. This extension (in terms of identity and action) of communication invites communion; this extension of relating invites relationship.

Additionally, as the above examples of self-disclosure demonstrate, and as Frederick Buechner observes, they are made “through the medium of what in Hebrew is called *dabbar*, which means both *word* and *deed*—the word that is also a deed because it makes things happen, and the deed that is also a word because, through it, is revealed meaning” (36). Word and deed are commingled and coequal. Word is as dependable as deed, and deed is as inspired as word. Words have the same effect as deeds done, and deeds speak and read as words.

With these understandings, I approach scriptural *logos* as “living and active” (*Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, Heb. 4.12)—at work, effective, and agential. G. K. Chesterton saw all language as “material and actual,” or “object” and “event” respectively, so “the words have life in themselves in a performative sense” (Milbank 89). Likewise, the *logos* is engaging, open to engagement, and able to be engaged. This is because the *ruach ha'kodesh* / *pneuma hagion* [RH/PH] utters the *logos*, breathes it out upon us, makes it new each time through us, and is present with it and with us as they surround us and as we take them into ourselves. To have them is to have the heart and mind of the *Logos*. The three are alive in and through each other. They are about (in terms of identity and action) each other’s acts and activities. The story of the *Logos* comes “not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1.5). Together, they desire to indwell, inspire, and enliven us; they desire we remain within them. It is a way to belong to one another, to tabernacle with one another, to make of each other a home. For me, the *logos* becomes a manifestation; it is a theophany. In the traditions of Augustine and Calvin, my response—whether my writing/action/deed, or my writings/beings/words—becomes the *Logos* made visible.

Since the *logos* is central to my identity and work, and to my work’s identity and work, it is crucial for understanding and interpreting what my writings say and do. All four lives are

caught up together: those of the Word, the Spirit, me, and my stories. My stories are in conversation with the *logos*, made alive to me by the *RH/PH*, so I read it with my own spirit of expectancy. In line with religious literary theorist Wesley Kort's concepts, I have both "centripetal" and "centrifugal" moments in my engagements with the *logos*: I draw into myself the knowledge imparted through my meditative study by the power of the *RH/PH*; it penetrates my heart and mind; and, I turn and apply what I have learned outward to life (28–31). My stories change in potential, because their interrelationship with the *logos* activates and vitalizes them. They, therefore, satisfy Buechner's ideal for "religious" fiction, both in their substance since they are "about the religious experience" and in their nature since the reading of them "is a religious experience," which occurs when a work of fiction "is entered here and there" by the *RH/PH* (21, emphasis in original). By these relationalities, the *logos* transpierces "with the sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6.17b), passing through and through writer and reader, until an alteration is realized and the new is revealed—as bloody as births and rebirths.

This ancient *Weltanschauung*, to which I subscribe, resists the dual movements in the Modern Age of Greco-Eurocentric cultures toward George Steiner's "retreat from the word" and Max Weber's "disenchantment of the world." Correspondingly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge outlined an intricate and esemplastic transaction in the imagination that gives "birth to a system of symbols, . . . consubstantial with the truth of which they are conductors" (Jackson 660). Religious literary theorist Roger Lundin notes, "The romantic theories of language promoted . . . that the human imagination had the power to unify nature and spirit, words and things, in such a way that the modern world would see the ancient unity of the Christian *Logos* restored" (46). Coleridge's "consubstantial" idea of language is exemplary for me, and my ascription of it to my own understanding of language aids readers in locating my perspective among the range of

Christian views. It follows the Reformation doctrines of impanation and invination (i.e., the coexistence of the *Logos* with the *eikon*, without replacing or changing it), as well as the Chalcedonian doctrine of hypostatic union (i.e., the coterminous combination of the fully human and fully divine natures within the incarnate *Logos*). Also, to distance it from contemporary usage, I must emphasize Coleridge's "incarnating" definition of *symbol*, which "partakes of the reality it renders intelligible" and "abides itself as a living part of that unity of which it is the representative" (White 30). Lundin shows how, from Coleridge's perspective, "real objects...could remain discrete and intact, even as the imagination transformed these natural objects into spiritual subjects. In making the idea and the symbol consubstantial with each other, Coleridge secured the rights of material creation even as he trumpeted the supremacy of the spiritual . . . realm" (45). Thus, language imparts the divine and provides for a numinous nexus between word and being.

By the *Logos*, existence is made and sustained; existence experiences past faithfulness, present power, and future promise; and, existence is "a dwelling place within which [humans] may learn who we are and what we might become" (Lundin 13, 41). As a result, this (re)source makes it possible that "language participates in the meaning and being of the realities it presents" (75). It is not enough for the *Logos* to be an idea; the *Logos* must be a being. In the *Logos*, we have the word, and we have the being. The *Logos* is image, not sign or pure indication, and not symbol or pure substitution. Hans-Georg Gadamer connected the Incarnation of the Word to the potentiality (in terms of identity and action) of word, "that that which emerges and externalizes itself in utterance is always already a word"; "[i]t has its being in revealing" (419–421). Alternatively, word effects and affects created worlds. These affordances maintain the value of the *logos* and the integrity of its self-reflexive identity-claims.

When I read literature, I do so from the understanding and interpretation that it operates as a spiritual statement. Readers may ascertain in and from a story: what, if any, opportunity exists for spiritual beings; their characters; and, their relationships to nature, to humans, and to individuals. I watch for stories' narrators and characters to experience spiritual utterances (in word and deed), and to express spirit-based faiths, doctrines, and/or assumptions. When fiction is set among specific, historical or contemporary peoples and places, and the story seems intent on spiritual potentiality serving as one of its primary explorations or considerations, I refer to this as *pneumatological expressionism*. For those of the Judæo-Christian faith heritage, this includes and involves the *RH/PH* in a created and immanent cosmos. However, the term has broader application to diverse spiritual beings and phenomena; the essential spiritual element of humans; or, interactions between humans and spirit-gods. But to contextualize my stories, I am responding to writer-editor Paul Elie's "hope to find the writer who can dramatize belief the way it feels in your experience, at once a fact on the ground and a sponsor of the uncanny" (BR1). When characters holding the point-of-view—the position of power and for empathy—are indoctrinated or inculcated along the Judæo-Christian spectrum, they are often more effectively portrayed by writers with such knowledge and experiences, like myself. Buechner agrees, "That is the experience I am trying to be true to in the same way that other novelists try to be true to the experience of being a woman, say, or an infantryman in the Second World War" (16). I strive to elucidate the perspectives and reasonings of the global variety of individuals who live, move, and have their being in the *Logos*.

One hears of the activity of the *RH/PH* in and through the world. When fiction includes it, the emphasis is usually located there, in that context. My priority, instead, is to divulge the activity of the *RH/PH* in and through the *logos*. Their engagement with one another and our

engagement with them means we can learn about, experience the character of, and enter into relationship with the *Logos*. The two of them tell the story that the One is story, and that all being is held together by story. Systematic theologian Robert Jenson affirms the *Logos* “can truly be identified by narrative” and “is constituted in *dramatic coherence*” (64, emphasis in original). The *Logos* speaks, acts, makes, and is eternal light, life, and love.

John Calvin taught that knowledge of God and humans is inseparable, and so, being the image-bearers of the *Logos*, we take on these configurations. This narrative account calls us, calls all, out of separation, into story. All stories participate in this “one vast story” (Buechner 137), “the story about every one of us” (138). Just as philosopher Paul Ricoeur posited that the ordering of our episodic experiences into a narrative framework can instill them with meaning, or “light up our own situation” (201–202), so can what Lundin calls the universe’s “storied order” valorize our otherwise individuated, seemingly random stories. Lundin means that “history is a narrative whose meaning unfolds over the course of time and in relationship to the purposes of God” (185). He contextualizes a life’s microcosmic chronicle within God’s macrocosmic saga. Hence, this cosmic *story* is more a Forsterian *plot*, and one’s “life has a plot the way a novel has a plot, that [is] events are somehow or other leading somewhere” (Buechner 12). Chesterton also derived “narrative ontology” from life, “in the sense that it has an entelechy,” and “to have this awareness is already to impart meaning to experience,” to bestow “storied character” on the cosmos, and to view humans as “storied beings” (Milbank 10–11). Such belief-convictions differentiate a point of view in which the inspired *logos* is present from a point of view from which it is absent. When entrusted to an individual, the *RH/PH* never rests (i.e., can be neither silent nor still), and the same is then true for the *logos*. In Judæo-Christian traditions, one is to follow their pattern of sound words—bearing those in mind whether

speaking or acting—and to surround oneself with written copies for mnemonic and instructive devices. My desire is for the words and deeds of my narratives to tell the overarching story of light, life, and love, and for my characters to be growing toward the same desire for their life-stories, because our spiritual growth may be catalyzed by the dynamism of this connective, entangled articulation.

Fittingly, Kort credits the *logos* with a “primarily narrative character” (13). As a result, I, like many writers who engage this *theopneustos* text, experience the *logos*-story as a rich and endless source for story, whether I paraphrase one of its wisdom-concepts, reenact one of its narratives, or re-present one of its types or metaphors. Buechner admits, “There could hardly be a greater miscellany of stories, characters, styles than are contained in this massive volume” (43). Bypassing its simple worth as a compendium of variety, Kort attends to the transportability of the texts, due to their tendency to “combine very particular figures, events, and situations with a language of general application” (8). This tactic makes the *logos* adoptable, according to Dr. Cynthia DeMarcus Manson, of Southern University, as “a cultural idiom—a set of easily recognized references employed for comparison or description in public discourse,” furnishing “an almost limitless supply of quote and allusion” (1). My concern, though, is not on highlighting the activity and influence of the humans in the *logos*, but on turning the gaze to the activity and influence of the *Logos*. I believe this aligns with the concern of the *logos*. Dr. Steven Lawson, pastor and seminary professor, points out that “there is no higher subject that any mind can ever contemplate,” nothing so “mind-expanding,” “heart-enlarging,” and “life-changing,” than to study the *Logos* (“Aseity” n. pag.). As aforementioned, the most direct access to the *Logos* is through its *logos*. I could spend a lifetime and all my lifework in this space, for here, as Lundin felt in adolescence about literature-at-large, is an opportunity to hear and speak with

others about what matters most (188), plus the opportunities to recall possibility and testament, and to experience two types of worlds—new and transformed.

Although I would never go as far as Dr. Peter Hawkins, of Yale Divinity School, in thinking of stories that engage the *logos* as “a secondary kind of scripture,” I do enjoy his sentiment that the scriptural text can have a sort of “after-life” in pneumatological expressionism (YouTube interview). For one example, this can come about by way of the *logos* “continuously opening itself up to the contemporary reality of the believer, ‘evangelizing’ human experience by making each isolated moment or event meaningful in terms of its whole,” “incorporat[ing] other stories into its larger and ongoing narrative” (6–7). I want to be very clear about this transaction, so it is not mistakenly reversed. During the conceptualization process, I do not submit the *logos* to my imaginative faculty; rather, I submit my imaginative faculty to the *logos*. Pre-existing wisdom interprets contemporary experience. I privilege the old (the thoughts of the *Logos*) over the new (my thoughts), which is counter-cultural for my time and place, and an attitude, once again, of the ancients. The story of the *Logos* is organic, partly because we are all part of it and the cast of characters changes with every moment of every day, as *pneuma* is drawn and released. When pneumatological expressionism speaks back to the *logos*, it opens additional readings and refreshes or contemporizes the narratives. It also adds to and extends the narratives; it furthers (in terms of identity and action) the narratives—complicating, enriching, and promoting them. But the *logos* keeps the first word and suggests the initial idea. I always ask the *logos* first what it has to say about or how it would speak to my subject matter.

Dr. Alison Milbank, of University of Nottingham, attaches the tendency toward quotation and allusion to Modernists, “so that new writing might be engendered from older material to make something fresh” (ix). This coincides with T. S. Eliot’s vision of literature (esp. poetry)

over the ages as “a living whole” (48)—interconnected and, thereby, able to remain alive, since new publications can recall and reinvigorate texts written centuries ago. While the past directs the present, the present alters the past (45), thanks to two continuous conditions: “the material of art is never quite the same,” yet collective or cultural artistic development “abandons nothing *en route*” (46, italics in original). Ancient writings may grow increasingly remote, yet they persist as the core of the known. I can tell the old story in new ways that deal in applicability, not allegory. Even the *Logos* spends much of the *logos* on the power and import of utterances, including requests for us to sing *a new song*, for One who also “will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph. 3.17). Always, I remember my stories speak back to the *Logos* as well.

Part II. The Practical: Making It Happen

Problems of communication arise whenever one person wishes to share religious, spiritual, or metaphysical *experiences*, or to share one’s reasoning behind such *expressions*. Flannery O’Connor considered this accessibility issue. To her, the dilemma arose with the writer’s needs to make the supernatural as understandable and credible to the reader as the natural (“Novelist” 161), and to make the divinity of the *Logos* consistent with the structure of the cosmos (*Habit* 290). Hawkins proposes O’Connor’s strategy was to locate the mystery of the supernatural in quotidian, recognizable life experiences (21–22). Consequently, a spiritual realm simultaneously inhabits and transcends the material world, and the ordinary becomes sacred (23). He grants that her fiction may qualify as realism but promulgates how its unconventional “vision of reality . . . detects the invisible world fomenting within the visible” (24). When her characters must navigate this impacted world to contend with their crises, their needed “breakthrough of insight . . . entails the utter breakdown of the normal . . . even, on occasion, the end of such

existence entirely” (28). Hawkins depicts the effect on her characters as their walking “on thin ice, suddenly to fall into a depth they never knew was there. It is the ‘added dimension’ of everyday life to which they are blind and oblivious, until the surface cracks, splits, and abandons them to a profundity of experience they cannot escape or explain away” (25). Encounters of the supernatural are as unexpected and mystifying to the characters as they are to the readers.

To prevent any contact with the sacramental in a story being received as meaningless by its readers, O’Connor imbued such moments with “enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. To this end,” O’Connor declares, “I have to bend the whole novel—its language, its structure, its action. . . . Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief” (“Novelist” 162). Her ideas and intentions springboard to another strategy, taken by many Modern and Postmodern writers, of immersing a narrative into speculative fiction, particularly the literary mode of magical realism, for the purpose of exhibiting what it is to believe one engages the supernatural in natural circumstances. Making the extraordinary ordinary (or familiarizing and desensitizing the reader in accordance with the characters’ and narrator’s stances) is important work for magical realism. It also succeeds at infusing the ordinary with the extraordinary (or defamiliarizing and attuning the reader to the differences of the characters’ and narrator’s stances). Magical realism changes the “as if” to “as.”

Even mainstream Christians struggle to share their perspectives with mainstream Christians, regardless of whether that happens between individuals or communities. Religious rhetorics manifest isolationist tendencies, not to mention the endless variations of vocabulary employed by people to describe their understandings of this spirit-god. Nevertheless, Dr. Timothy Keller, pastor and best-selling author, asserts that belief in the supernatural is one

inherent characteristic of the 21st-century Christian. If, as Dr. Eberhard Jüngel, lately of University of Tübingen, describes, Christian faith “brings to expression more than the actual and yet equally engages with actuality” (71), then it is no wonder poet-critic Dana Gioia recognizes “the great potential of Christian literature to depict the material world, the physical world of the senses, while also revealing behind it another invisible and eternal dimension” (42). It is no less surprising that so many Catholic and Protestant fiction writers have adapted magical realism for re-vision through the Judæo-Christian lens. The apple is not falling far from the tree there, since “many biblical texts and stories are themselves discomfiting and estranging, escaping all categories, defeating all definition” (Wood n. pag., analyzing Milbank’s ideas). This ‘magical’ method of presentation emulates the same of the *Logos*-storyteller in the *logos*-story.

Italo Calvino grounded the fantastic tale in individual perception and one’s resulting philosophic speculation (vii). An experience of the fantastic requires a decision as to what one will believe. Calvino distinguished, in his own words, the two options Tzvetan Todorov presented for handling “our perplexity in the face of an incredible fact”: “a rational, realistic explanation and an acceptance of the supernatural” (vii–viii). Milbank designates this “Todorov’s duality of miracle or secularity” (45). At times in fantastic tales, the supernatural is invisible yet felt. It undergoes an “interiorization,” through which “[i]t comes to form part of an interior dimension, as a mood or a conjecture” (xii–xiii), part “of the interior, subjective world of the mind, the imagination” (ix). Calvino names this iteration the *introspective fantastic*. At other times, I contend that fantastic tales dignify or equalize the concretization of the spectacular, which Charles Williams liked to call “Fact” (i.e., supernaturalism is “as it is”). In this mode, the supernatural is elemental. Calvino names that iteration the *visionary fantastic*, since it is seen (i.e., supported by empirical evidence). This binary modality adds an important balance between

the experiences and expressions of the supernatural, along with a critical observation of the two ways authors tend to use magical realism. These authors, when working out of or with a predominantly Christian worldview, do not necessarily choose the marvelous or, when they do, necessarily attribute that quality to universalized enchantment. However, the works in this collection do, since I hierarchize the efficacy of the *logos* and the relatability of the *Logos*. I see them fulfilled in each other and in all things, and my stories illustrate these magical becomings.

Calvino turns to Nathaniel Hawthorne for differentiating “the drama of the individual conscience,” which is the *introspective fantastic* (as portrayed in “Egoism, or the *Bosom Serpent*”), from “the relentless representation of a world forged by a thwarted religiosity,” which is the *visionary fantastic* (as portrayed by the witches’ Sabbath in “Young Goodman Brown”) (xiii). Engagement with the supernatural occurs within what seems like, and is often labelled as, internal or external boundaries. That is, the transformative power may affect what feels as within or without oneself. Tension rises when writers and readers of magical realism want to grant or deny permission for any of these multiple possibilities. Toni Morrison in *Beloved* makes clear that all involved characters corroborate the physical presence of Sethe’s self-regenerated murdered daughter, while William Kennedy in *Ironweed* reserves all encounters with ghosts to Francis Phelan’s cognizance alone. But then, Grace McCleen in *The Land of Decoration* refuses to determine whether God’s voice speaks audibly in the world, or whether Judith McPherson hears it in her mind only, maybe even as a figment of her imagination.

My story “Craftsmen” began with a passage from Isaiah (specifically chapter 44, verses 9–20), in which humans’ handcrafted idols are desacralized by emphasizing their exclusive materiality. Wishing to heighten its contemporary application, I asked of the passage what qualities the described idols possessed that someone of my time and place may ascribe to a

construct to make it an idol, knowing that may not include materiality. I imagined a person striving to isolate for and dedicate to him-/herself a construct that s/he could then approach through worship-rituals with the hope of negotiating the provisions necessary to empower and enrich his/her life with bodily comfort, peace of mind, or emotional security. This practice might be attempted on any construct that could be provisional: an occupation, employer, sexual partnership, romantic relationship, home, spouse, parent, or child. Each could be idolized in an effort to secure personal value and satisfaction, even though none are built with the capacity to stand such pressure or to support such demand. Elevating them in this way serves to lower the goodness they are capable of bringing into one's life. The person ironically spends his/her resources providing for the empowerment and protection of the idolatized construct. I wanted to explore how this behavior comes to pass for several different but everyday people, whether any of them could begin to recognize this tendency in themselves, and whether they could build themselves to sincere worship. I knew this would involve 'a touch of the fairy' in the setting in order "to witness to that site's intrinsic sacrality" (Milbank 8), but I also wanted to examine unwitting human participation in sacred rites.

Milbank spotlights how "Christian writers of the fantastic . . . realize, however, that it is not enough to present their readers with the world described in tones of wonder. . . . The challenge to a religious fullness of experience must be intellectually engaged and in some sense entered into before re-enchantment can be effected" (Milbank 8–9). More than Herod Antipater's delight with magical party tricks, an encounter with the *Logos* can have lasting impact on one's reasoning. In "The Sermon on the Mount" passage of Levi Matthew's gospel, he records this striking, hyperbolic advice from the Christ: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be

thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matt. 5.29–30). This extremist solution or superlative imagery was not meant to lead the listener to self-mutilation, but rather was meant to stress the seriousness of the sin problem and to hint at the severity of sacrifice required to solve it. Borrowing this logical approach, I envisioned how I might literalize the consequences of one’s commitment to one’s idol. If I were to take the idea as far as it could go, or enlarge the image as big as it can be, what would it start to expose? Yielding the fantastic from the frantic or even fanatic can lay bare the misdirection of the gaze, the misattribution of power and potentiality, and their deleterious effects on any one person and his/her relationships with those whom s/he desires to love. If the descendants of “Craftsmen” notice the planks in their elders’ eyes, perhaps they might feel the specks of sawdust in their own eyes (Luke 6.41) and to learn what *has* been inherited from these human parents, albeit immaterial.

The *logos*, like other texts centralized by a community into a core cultural contributor, supplies figural, situational, and thematic images that possess ongoing familiarity. It is precisely the recursive use/appearance of these imprints that allow for them to be repurposed/recognized and tied back to earlier purposes/meanings, thereby perpetuating a sociohistorical discourse and deepening the rhetoric of the icons. They contribute to the lexicon available for Christians and make their language idiomatic. Calvino would say the images are “collectively held” (vii) and link the Christian disciple to communal memory. They are so easily conveyed through story that whenever an issue or incident arises in life, one can quickly relay an appropriate narrative from the *logos* that will speak volumes to the present circumstances. Thus, they are connected to and sustained by their story-contexts. For example, in the *logos*, iconic gestures (deeds) are paired

with original covenants (words) for the sake of remember-ance or re-collection. The following were selected during the establishments of key covenants for phenomenal reiterations of those vows: rainbow formations; circumcision; divine healing; sprinkling of blood; divine alliance in battle; Sabbath; inheritance; peacemaking; abundance; the backward movement of the sun; baptism; and, communion. Each sighting speaks a story of promise and presence. The stabilization of imagery into motif enables the edification of a heterogeneous group, of one to the other within that group, and of those to come after them, as well as the strengthening and beautification of a shared heritage.

DeMarcus Manson reviews how George MacDonald, Charles Dickens, and Christina Rossetti “identified and attempted to address an underlying issue in the erosion of nineteenth-century religious faith,” which had affected “even the hearts and minds of society’s overtly religious population” (2). Their works “The Light Princess,” *Great Expectations*, and “Goblin Market,” respectively, were a “response to many religious, spiritual and philosophic issues of their time” (33). Each writer was concerned about the evidences around them of what proved to be a spiritual crisis in the Victorian era, whose residuum was to last into the Edwardian era and twentieth century. Members and attitudes of the Church of England did not escape the writers’ public critiques and challenges. The three, in these works, employed fairy themes for subversion of post-Darwinian naturalism and post-Industrial Revolution materialism, an option that Milbank concurs was effective on other occasions “to introduce a sense of the holy in an increasingly disenchanted and secularized society” (8). But more to the point, they targeted the particular sensibilities of Christian readers with “biblical typological symbolism” (DeMarcus Manson 72). Reliant on Old and New Testament imagery, this was “the typological method of scriptural interpretation commonly used and understood in Victorian society.” DeMarcus Manson catalogs

much biblical imagery from the three pieces (e.g., the command “Let there be light” while Adela finds herself in a dark chaos; the comparison of Pip to an embryonic fruit-bearing plant; the stricken or smitten rock in contrast to the life-threatening loss of water in Laura’s life). Yet she lists each as moments MacDonald, Dickens, and Rossetti discuss the need for or activity of spiritual awakening and growth among those who have fallen asleep or lost the way.

My story “Still” rewards devoted audiences of the *logos*-story. It casts resemblances of John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ, as well as a sampling of the latter’s apostles and disciples, in a restaging of John’s execution and of Christ feeding multitudes, walking on water, quieting a sea storm, and facing imminent execution. It is replete with imagery from the four gospels. Much like the ritual of the community quilt, I display the images for today’s disciples, knowing the heritage pieces will resonate with them and speak encouragement and comfort to them. It is beneficial for any day’s disciples to see among them the same enactments witnessed by first-century disciples, so they may apprehend the inspiring movement of the *RH/PH*, be heartened in living out the sacrificial but good life of the *Logos*, and be reminded there is nothing new under the sun. I hope to bring to mind the great family that is theirs around the globe and across the ages, as well as the light, life, and love that relate them, that are ever active through and around them, that have never changed up to their generation, and that will never falter in their innumerable descendants. The images are assertion. They are testimony. They are promises fulfilled.

Because of their relationalities with the *logos* and with artworks based on the same, my stories productively engage with what has come before them and with what is being done alongside them. My audiences will find pleasure in making connections, finding patterns, recognizing allusions, and culling meaning from outside my stories. The work participates in

established traditions and joins a history and a heritage, rather than attempting to birth traditions, begin an historical account, or operate outside its influences or foundations. Kort proffers the contention “that the standing or role of biblical texts in relation to the culture is of more actual and potential consequence for it than is the standing or role of religious institutions or communities, noteworthy as these in many ways are. It is not so much that the texts are important because of institutions or communities as that institutions or communities derive their importance from these texts” (8). Harking back to the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* (i.e., the full and final authority of Scripture), I am more interested in stories that converse with the supportive life of the *logos*, which speaks positively for the *Logos*, than those that converse with the schismatic history of the Church, which speaks negatively for the *Logos*.

At the same time, I am a writer in The Program Era [McGurl (2009)]; these stories do come out of the support of academia and its creative writing programs. And as I write in this context, postsecular critics “embrace assumptions that close off in advance the thought of taking seriously . . . the incarnate Word” (Lundin 87), and “Postmodernist culture . . . has no resources in itself to take up the question of ‘scripture’ as a category in textual theory or to revive the kind of reading appropriate to it” (Kort 66–67). Additionally, a shift in Greco-Eurocentric thinking moved the locus of spiritual authority from gods to human experience, and the great human problem from sin to death. Now, Christian experience, gestural practice, and Orsi’s “lived religion” (i.e., the doing, or deed) are acceptable, while divine revelation, doctrinal belief, and professions of faith or creedal affirmations (i.e., the speaking, or word) are unacceptable. This holds true for the contents of literary fiction. “Still” responds to this presumed or putative state of the *Logos* and *logos*—that they are both *silent* (word) and *inactive* (deed)—and puts forward what I profess must be believed about the *Logos* in order to trust its heart and to stay in loving

relationship with it: I AM with you; I AM in control; I AM good; I AM thinking of you and acting on your behalf, for your good.

Folktales developed much like the oral traditions, their chirographic and typographic recordings, and the canonization process of the *logos*. Editors Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow delineate how folktales, too, are “a collective art” with “each author . . . participating in a dialogue reaching across centuries” (*Ruby Slippers* 6; an idea also expressed by DeMarcus Manson 18). This evolutionary progression means “old tales exist in myriad forms, changing and adapting from culture to culture, from generation to generation,” and their capacity to wear so many different forms provides for their longevity (*Black Swan* 1). Folktales’ audiences have that same “particular fascination of an old, familiar story made fresh and new by an artist’s skill” (*Snow White* 8). Yet, despite all the redressings, “the core of the tale remains the same,” and “their themes are as relevant today as they were back in centuries past” (*Black Swan* 2–3). Windling theorizes this is possible because any one of these core themes goes right “to the very hearts of men and women and speaks of the things it finds there” (*Snow White* 4). All this sounds familiar to genre elements in the *logos*. Traditional folklore content operates in correspondent ways. Folkloristics teach the combination of a familiar, recognizable stock of tropes and types. The imagery, plots, and themes recreate the process of transformation. And, as with the *logos*, folktales do not shy away from graphic actions, including frank sexuality, brutal violence, and complex family dynamics.

For my story “Les Cousines Souris,” I partnered a fable (aka apologue) with relatable passages from the Wisdom books to bring moral guidance to bear on individuals’ values, subsequent behavior choices, and levels of happiness, since I believe happiness is the liberty and ability to live in accordance with one’s values, which are based on one’s beliefs. I know it is

problematic to treat Scripture as morality tales. Buechner frames the threat as follows: if one reduces the purpose of the stories of the *logos* to making “a point as extractable as the moral at the end of a fable, then the inevitable conclusion is that once you get the point, you can throw the story itself away like the rind of an orange when you have squeezed out the juice” (132). He extends this to the reduction of the life of the *Logos*: “if once we have gotten the message . . . , grasped the point of it (whatever that means), we can set the life itself aside along with the death like the rind of the squeezed orange again. It becomes merely something we can draw on for moral guidance perhaps or spiritual comfort or religious truth” (136). Even so, a relationship with the *Logos* is as much about sanctification as it is about salvation. When one receives a new life, one must then live it. The *Logos* avers that those who know its voice listen to it, love the speaker, do what the speaker commands, and follow where the speaker leads (John 10.27, 14.15). This is the point of application, for it is not enough to hear the Word and do nothing in response. One’s faith-life must experience and express itself in word and deed. Therefore, the trustworthiness of the *logos* is essential. One depends on it to engage with the thoughts, feelings, desires, will, and other motivations of the *Logos* revealed therein. This engagement increases familiarity with the character of the *Logos* and the ability to recognize and participate in its activity.

“Les Cousines Souris” combines multicultural folktales from the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) 112 classification [labelled as the “Town Mouse and Country Mouse” collection and summarized as, “Country mouse visits town mouse. Former prefers poverty with safety”] with Wisdom passages about the wealthy having much to fear and placing their trust in their possessions, and the dispossessed having nothing to fear and being better positioned to trust in divine provision and assurance. Lessons from fables and the Wisdom books are designed to

address all of life, including priorities for being a creature-animal in the world. From the dual textual sources, I drew these thematic tendencies: looking either to another person or to divine partnership for necessities; the dangers and regrets that opulence attracts, versus what quieter, humbler lives yield; the difference between gain through immediacy and diligence; the pursuit of blessings as ends in themselves, and the ultimate frustration from treating them so; the tendency to corral and contrast urban-educated-enlightened-rational-relevant against rural-naïve-superstitious-religious-outdated; and, the posing of secular lives as rich with pleasures, happiness, and satisfaction, and Christ-based lives as limited, impoverished, and mortifying. I muddle these classifications to personalize the generalities into specific sets of needs and circumstances, and to expose how complicated the endeavor of practical application of wisdom guidance becomes amid everyday power struggles, especially since people’s lives are so impacted by their creaturely relationships. This shifts the purpose from didacticism and conversion in the original forms to assertion and testimony in literary narratives.

I incorporated the Greco-Judaic literary convention, commonplace in Wisdom literature, called *chiasm* (aka *chiasmus*) into the story’s structure. This layout repeats themes in a reverse order sequence for clarification or emphasis. Each theme receives one repetition, and each repetition is placed equidistantly from the original introduction of the theme. The scheme, then, has two sides. The shortest version of this pattern would be A-B-B’-A’, but in the *logos*, the structure builds as large as A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J-J’-I’-H’-G’-F’-E’-D’-C’-B’-A’. Typically, the center point (or the pair of themes in the middle) is the most important. Each repetition may keep the same sentiment as its partner, or the author may opt to make the partners antithetical, so when the repetition occurs, it reverses the logic or meaning. “Les Cousines Souris” crescendos and decrescendos as A-B-C-D-E-F- F’-E’-D’-C’-B’-A’.

Throughout the composition of this collection, I have been frustrated with the concentration in my readings on spatial relationships. Kort problematizes the role taken “by the language of space or place” in Postmodernist discourses via Frederic Jameson’s remarks that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time” (74). I must tread lightly here, because the *logos* invests heavily in spatial metaphors to describe spiritual relationalities. But I want to spend some effort decentering the emphatic othering of spirit, or the dichotomizing of spirit and body, word and thing, God and human, immanent and transcendent, sin and death, life here and life there, as if they were not in continuity with one another and only ever had spatial relationships to one another (esp. in the positioning of inside/interior and outside/exterior).

This divisiveness or compartmentalization is encumbered with Plato’s separation of the word-proxy (present) from the wordless idea (absent), and the dyadic Saussurean sign’s dependency on presence (signifier) and absence (signified). Karl Barth equated believing “that God can and must only be absolute in contrast to all that is relative, exalted in contrast to all that is lowly, active in contrast to all suffering . . . transcendent in contrast to all immanence, and therefore divine in contrast to everything human” to forcing God to “be only the ‘Wholly Other’” (*Church Dogmatics* 186). The Incarnation fulfilled all that was written about the *Logos* in the Mosaic Law, the Hebraic prophecies, and the psalms (Luke 24.44), which required becoming fully human in every way, enduring every human hardship, assuming human sin, and dying a human death, all to be human mediation. In addition to a human body, the *Logos* chose to appropriate human language—in both instances, eradicating spatial distances and distinctions. Barth sought to move the debate about language from the signification framework to the narrative framework (Lundin 94), since the *Logos* exalts language as the system by which it

makes covenants with humans and relays the stories of its extended efforts to keep those covenants, from the first to the final generations. This language structure is better expressed and experienced through diachrony. Kort mentions, “teleologies [are] implicit in the language of time” (75). Meanwhile, the Saussurean system is limited to the synchronic. Accordingly, temporal relationships prove more effective for revealing meaning, purpose, and connectivity.

For these reasons, I utilized the biblical device that links the prophetic interactions and events of the Jewish history recorded in the Tanakh to the fulfilled interactions and events of the Incarnation recorded in the books of the New Testament. Lundin brings up a medieval storytelling practice that celebrated this connective relationship in the *logos* between the two eras. With “figural interpretation,” a storyteller builds toward a second, subsequent person or event that involves and fulfills a preceding person or event. From the hindsight gained by the audience, the first person/event is validated as anticipatory; the first person/event remains substantial but also points forward to the second person/event; the second person/event becomes significant; and, together, they establish a storied relationship between persons/events separated by time. What had been two disparate phenomena are disclosed as the same historical experience. (Lundin 123–124) The audience may sense that “the comprehensive reality of all events is timelessly present” (124). Feminist theorist Karen Barad, whose research is informed by quantum physics, speaks of the concepts of “past,” “present,” and “future” being entangled but having no inherently determinate relationship (*Utrecht* n. pag.). In fact, “‘past’ and ‘future’ are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through the world’s ongoing intra-activity,” which means past, present, and future “are always being reworked.” These time intra-actions are each “re-doing the material configurings of spacetime-mattering.” By the collapse of these quantitative durations of time that create space-gaps in our imaginations between persons, peoples, and

events, the events materializing in two different people's or people-groups' lives can be experienced as if occurring together and, thus, in conversation with one another. In other words, time compresses between moments, so the latter lose all understanding of spatial differentiation from one another as the audience takes meaning from them.

To add spiritual repercussions, Lundin presents “figural interpretation” within the framework of “sacred time” (Lundin 123; i.e., the linking of separate occurrences within the divine plan, as opposed to “secular/profane time” that views successive events without distinction across a single plane). With this, Lundin can transform what may be interpreted as the natural development of a course of discrete events into the revelation—each in their decreed time—of divinely ordered and bound elements of “God’s redemptive history of promise and providential care” (124). For one to see the connection between the people/events, then, is “a spiritual act”; it is to see the people and events of the world as the *Logos* sees them, even though one must remain bound to one’s own historical moment. The benefit to catching this glimpse, even if “everything remains a matter of partial understanding,” is that limited knowledge is now “sustained by the hope of fulfillment and the promise of revelation.” That is how figural interpretation imitates one purpose of the *logos*-history for its audience: to unveil the deliberate plan and foreknowledge of and about the *Logos*.

Mikhail Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita* and Charles Williams in *All Hallows' Eve* conflate characters and settings that would be contemporary to them with those from the New Testament. Both novels are profound philosophical and theological meditations and make connections between elements of seeming mysteries. In *The Master and Margarita*, the oppression of the Soviet state under Joseph Stalin’s regime undulates among two-thousand-year-old scenes from Pilate’s days in Yerushalayim. In the Moscow setting, the storyline extends from

Wednesday through Saturday nights; in the Yershayalim setting, it is Passover, and the storyline moves through the trial, execution, and reported resurrection of Yeshua. Bulgakov interprets the established incidents in Yershayalim as political and rhetorical anglings and switches back and forth at precise, key moments from the Moscow characters and events in present-time, whose behaviors are now viewed by the reader through the lens of the Yershayalim happenings. While Bulgakov illumined his current sociopolitical situation with New Testament details, Williams invested in a “total disregard for the conventional distinctions of time and space” (Carpenter *Inklings* 95) and of natural and “Arch-natural” (85; Williams’s word for “supernatural”). His novels remove these barriers, so the metaphysical activities in his contemporary London (“the City” in *All Hallows’ Eve*) are the same metaphysical activities that happened around the Christ. The Arch-natural is present and active, and its motivations and intentions do not differ in relation to ongoing natural events, despite temporal and historical changes. *All Hallows’ Eve* pits love against the pursuit of power, and salvation against domination. It reembodies Simon Magus as the villain (Simon the Clerk) and questions redemption’s relationship to faith-works. The world revolves through the same spiritual schemata. It does not matter when one lives.

My story “Ex Nihilo” began with several intergenerational intersections and sea-changes in my life, such that I scrutinized my faith and how much it mattered that it was a part of my life. During the invention process, I was partaking of Communion with my church family and had a powerful imagining of all the many people the world over who were partaking of Communion while we were, or on the same morning for them of that day—the most common time to participate in the sacrament. Then, I thought how much more wondrous was imagining the concurrent partaking with all the disciples of all time. I felt so close to them and knew we were drawn together by the lives of our faiths. This reminded me of the eleventh chapter of the book

of Hebrews, the “By Faith” chapter, in which each party is introduced in accordance to how they lived their lives of faith. The author indicates how often the life of faith is more about the unseen or unrealized, when he writes that these ancestors “were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (verses 39–40). The first body of Christ prefigured all the lives of faith yet to be born. The passage ends with the culminating idea that today’s Church, each and every one of those living by faith, “are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses” (12.1). We fulfill their moments, and they resound in ours. They could see us then, and we can see them now. Our faith eliminates the distances between us.

In the very next verse, we learn our faiths are authored, by the *Logos* (12.2). Faith originates with the *Logos*. I thought increasingly about what it means to identify with our faiths and to be identified by our faiths—both for individuals and for the corporate Church, both then and now—and how that plays out in our personages and the events of our lives. How are we and our ways forever changed, because we are presented with this gift? I gathered the characteristics of “faith” as they are given throughout the *logos*, and I shaped these into a personification to play with what is entailed in living with faith, how that makes a life different, and what specifically happens when that faith is involved or compromised. I thought of: a person caring for her faith in ways necessary to it in order for it to grow and strengthen so, when necessary, that faith can care for her in ways necessary to her; a person who lives with her faith and whose faith will never leave or forsake her, regardless of whether that produces blessing or frustration; a person who must contend and negotiate with her faith, who is bound to differ with her, since they have separate capacities, priorities, and inclinations; a person who is learning how to apply her faith properly and effectively; a person who is associated with her faith in a closeness of relationship

that largely defines her *ethos*; a person whose individual faith is evaluated in connection to assumptions made about a larger, comprehensive faith of the Church; a person who wishes to share the very best and most beautiful part of herself with others, who prove repulsed by it; a person who longs for her faith to find a secure support network to accept it and believe in the value of encouraging and nurturing it, whether established in the past or the present. In other words, I pictured a home made of a person and her faith, a faith and her person, among a community of others building the same, across unbounded time. Everlasting.

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Craftsmen

Beor stewed inside his parked Schwan's grocery-delivery truck, inside a cul-de-sac, inside the vast region he called his "own personal Gehinnom." This area stretched as far north as Cedaredge or as far south as Telluride and spanned from Gateway to Gunnison, with Black Canyon at the heart of it all. *God's country*, folks called it, and people the world over made pilgrimage to this paradise every day. They were pretty much the only thing about the place to change, that anyone could recognize. Pretty much.

Here he sat, chunking off and crunching pieces of a popsicle with his teeth—popsicles that were supposed to be going as free incentives to the residents on the other sides of those doors encircling him. The red ones dyed his mouth the worst, followed by the purple, leaving the orange the safest. But he was indulging in red, because they were the best, and because he knew he would not be talking to anyone that day. The truck's refrigeration remained at -20°F , so when he had offered the popsicles, in the days leading up to this one, he warned people that they would stick to their tongues. Beor would say, "Then again, that's probably not the best *icebreaker* to get ya to want one, huh?" and he would drum a little "Ba-doom-boom—*ching!*" with two individually wrapped popsicles.

Upon his hire, there were no available routes, but Beor put his hope in a route opening in a couple months. Until then, Beor filled in for other drivers, covered their routes wherever that

might take him, and tried his best to translate each of their customers' requests: going into unlocked, empty houses, putting food inside strangers' freezers, and taking their money off their countertops; or, staying calm while a pet raccoon rubbed against his legs like a housecat as he walked from the truck to the kitchen stoop. This went on for almost a year.

Every workday that the two mountain passes he had to cross between his home in Sapinero and the Schwan's distribution center in Montrose did not give him any trouble, he got himself out of bed at 5 a.m. to be there when due at 7. He stayed out as long as necessary to complete the route's deliveries, returning by 9 p.m. to his double-wide among the other homes serviced by three switchbacks snaking up the side of a mesa. Every line of houses rose above the one in front of it to maintain a watch on the western end of Blue Mesa Reservoir, the largest lake in Colorado, though artificial. Sapinero boasted a joint gas station and trading post. His son, Cheyenne, was five, so Beor did not see the boy on workdays, but most of the time, his wife, Jehona, would still be awake. Many times, the house would be as black as the lake, and he would pass through it to a rear window and see her out back, standing with her arms twisted in oversized sleeves before a steel-barrel fire. She would slip into bed after him—the smoke on her never smelling the same way twice. That is, if she made it to bed at all.

Those days did end, though, when Schwan's made a change. They assigned drivers in Beor's situation to "route-building." This was the company's name for unsolicited door-to-door sales and customer recruitment. Despite his manager's past promises about his fate with the company, Beor, too, having earned no special favor after all, was slotted into this position and congratulated for receiving such a worthwhile response to his devotion. He had served faithfully, and here was his reward. But he saw it as profitless. All along, he had been shaping nothing. And now, he had been route-building long enough to have handed out free pot pies in the last few

weeks of freeze, pizzas in the thaw, and popsicles in the high-desert swelter. He would park the truck somewhere out of the way and hike a territory on foot, shouldering his big insulated bag.

People had not responded well to any of his opening lines. They seemed to have decided before he even knocked on the door. He could have been anyone, selling anything. They did not listen to his pleas or bargains. They did not laugh at his jokes. They waved at him, but not as a greeting, or an invitation. They flipped it at him with the backs of their fingers. They addressed him as “No, no.” While walking away, he would quip over his shoulder that his baby had once worn a bib that read, “My name is no-no.” Their doors were already shut. “Like father, like son,” he told their front walkways.

His manager’s heart was hardening against him. To Cy, Beor must look profitless. Cy started commenting and then warning that Beor was not getting enough people to sign up for weekly deliveries or even to place single orders. He needed more from Beor. So, Beor resorted to talking to closed doors, raising his voice to them. His words reverberated in his face from the hard surfaces. Cy then mentioned complaints of harassment. Beor, himself harried, stopped getting out of the truck. Instead, he spoke to pretend-potential-customers from the driver’s seat, staring down a house. The glare of a front picture-window faced down the glare of his windshield under the high sun. Finally, his manager gave him a two-week notice: if he did not create new business for the company in that time, then his services would no longer be required.

This was his last day. He tapped the stained popsicle stick against his bright red lips. The reflection of the truck grill on a window of the house across from him made the window—the whole house—look barred. Over the last two weeks, he had applied to 42 open positions, resulting in two interviews with suit-wearers who did not make eye contact, and one call-back from a scam company whose representative had talked over him until he had to hang up on the

voice. The other companies' lack of interest in him, as well as that of potential customers, Cy, and even Jehona, whose withheld affections made him feel the most rejected, had him doubting everything he held valuable.

Beor spotted the Corolla in his side-view mirror pulling up behind the truck. He glanced around his truck-cab, threw the popsicle stick on the floor, licked his lips, and wiped his mouth back-and-forth along his forearm. Cy's face popped up behind the passenger's side window, and Cy rapped on the glass. He had climbed onto the side-step of the truck and was holding himself steady with the grip. Beor did not unlock the door but rolled down the window, smiling and greeting him. The man's top lip was so tense under his moustache that he was baring his top row of teeth.

"What's going on out here, man?" Cy asked but did not wait for an answer, even though Beor's lips were already in motion. "Creeped-out woman called dispatch, said she's got some guy, been sitting outside her house all day in his truck. I had to come out and check on you, ya know? We got a problem?"

"No, sir. Not at all. Seems she's just a bit mistaken. I just got back from hoofing it. Although she's right about the truck; it's been here. This is where I left it. Sorry about that. Normally, I do a better job of picking out-of-the-way places."

While Beor spoke, Cy looked around the cab—trashed with packaging and cartons. In his final effort to appease his employer, Beor had been entering bogus customer contact information to generate false individual sales, paying for the products with cash, and eating the food himself. He had used microwaves in known customers' houses when they were not home. Today, his anxiety had made his appetite insatiable, but he could not heat anything. So, the floorboard was littered with popsicle remains. Cy reached through the window and unlocked the door. He swung

himself into the cab and kicked at the trash to make space for his feet. He removed his sunglasses, looked at Beor, and scratched his moustache.

“You look like a clown,” Cy said, jabbing his sunglasses toward Beor’s mouth, which Beor snapped shut, biting the tip of his tongue in the process. Even the apples of his cheeks lit up in pain. Cy sighed and held out an open palm, “Lemme look at your orders, man.” He waited.

“I’m not gonna have a job, Cy.”

Cy folded his arms, tucking himself against the seatback. “I knew it.”

“I mean I haven’t been able to get another job. You deny me this? I’ve got nothing. Except my wife and son to look after.”

Cy extended his arms, addressing the dashboard. “What do you want from me? I got nothing for you either. It’s not me letting you and your family down here. You get that, right? Why you wanna put this on me? This is all you, man. I’ve given you all I’ve got to give.”

“I just thought you could, or that I could—but it’s not happening for me.” Beor waited for Cy to grant something, anything, but Cy had already done what he was going to do and now was silent. His profile was another closed door. “I’m gonna call it a day. Return the truck.”

“And clean it out.” Cy put his sunglasses back on.

“Of course—” Beor was saying, but Cy was already maneuvering his feet out of the truck. Beor heard him cuss when some garbage fell. Cy shut the door, disappeared for a moment, stepped back up, and threw the debris into the cab. Beor flinched. Cy jumped down and cursed again. “All right?” Beor called through the open window, but he did not hear any response.

From the side-mirror view, it looked like Cy was favoring one ankle on the way back to his car.

It was still early afternoon, so Beor parked his Jeep along U.S. Highway 50 and walked over the back of the hill into Sapinero. Keeping an eye on his place, he snuck to the back door of his friend Piemacum's trailer, which was also the office headquarters of Sapinero Scuba Diving. This man had been his only friend in grade school, had seconded him in every fight in high school, and had named his son. Beor did not knock yet was greeted with an outstretched beer when he sidled through the beads hanging inside the sliding glass door. It was not ritual for him to visit his friend in the middle of a workday, but Piemacum saw storms before they came over the hills. The two had discussed the ionized clouds collecting at Beor's job. Other thunderheads they had watched gather for many years. Piemacum smiled, overlooking the official firing in order to celebrate the significance of the day for another reason: Beor's birthday.

"Twenty-five today, huh? Is it *mazel tov*, then?" Piemacum hugged Beor, who pretended to scowl. He picked Beor off his feet and jounced him to shake the tension out of him. He set him down and bent to meet the shorter man's eyes. Grasping his upper arms, Piemacum asked, "Have you decided to go? Be the big man?"

Beor cracked open his beer and raised the can in a toast to the idea. Piemacum double-clapped his arms and grabbed two paddles off the wall and a satchel off the floor.

"Ready, then? Bring your beer."

The two men made their way with the canoe over their heads through a few neighbors' yards, along the last stretch of access road, across the highway, and onto the beach. They pushed out northward into the water and continued that course for about a mile, until they knew they were floating somewhere above Old Sapinero, the original city still beneath the water. It had been the stage stop at the eastern entrance of the Black Canyon and, after that, a depot stop on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad narrow gauge line between Denver and Salt Lake City. This

hustle-and-bustle of traders and travelers, cattle and sheep concentrated itself among the nomadic bands of Utes inhabiting the region and was given the name of one of the latter's prestigious members.

Whether theirs may be the first or last set of feet to enter the canyon, anyone is able to sense they stand at the bottom of a hatchet wound to the earth struck by a great god. On either side rise two thousand feet of raw, exposed rock with veins swelling along the ridges. Light and dark grapple all day in the narrow confines. Light stabs into the dark, reaching to the quick. Dark fractures and shifts. It hunkers itself behind safeguards and scouts spaces to spread. Many who come to witness this flickering, regardless of how they arrived, stay to gain the glories revealed to them.

Beor's family erected their homestead in Sapinero in the 1880s. His great-great-grandfather built the house and passed it to his son when the son turned twenty-five years old. Beor's great-grandfather passed the house to his son at the same age, as did Beor's grandfather, Jorel, for Beor's father, Akim. Twenty-five became the coming-of-age birthday in the family for the firstborn sons, and the two-story structure housed any number of the residing patriarch's relations. In effect, Akim had waited eighty years to inherit the house when he turned twenty-five. He proposed to his wife, Leya, because of his expectation, and they set the wedding on his birthday to spend their first night in the master chamber on the same day it legally became his. At that time, though, it was decided to build Blue Mesa Dam on the Gunnison River, which would result in the reservoir. The entire town had to be relocated by the completion of the dam in 1963, since the water would cover over it and rise high above it.

Everyone left. Everyone except Akim and Leya. Despite the pleading of Jorel and other family members, friends, residents, and government officials, they remained in the house, alone

in the town, among all the abandoned homes, the train depot, the engine house, and the travel hotels. The last sale in town was paint to Akim, so his bride could have her chosen color on the exterior of the house. Akim also walked to the edge of town with the purpley-gray paint, swabbed out the population number on Sapinero's border sign, and brushed on a big "3." As the last proof of their dedication to maintaining the homestead and claiming it as their own, they had conceived a child, a son, Beor, whose name "burning" was meant to declare their fiery passion. Folks tended to cite the alternative meaning of "foolish or mad" in order to agree he was well-named. Beor was Akim and Leya's defense against others' judgments. They believed everything could be recovered.

The last seen of Akim and Leya, they were busy fortifying the house for the eventual 940,800 acre feet of water volume to sit on its surfaces. They prepared the first floor, the second floor, the roof. Always the water filling in beneath their feet—up through the floorboards, along the walls, against both sides of the windowpanes. Jorel stood at the ever-expanding water's edge, calling to his son to abandon this fabrication. Beor became increasingly prominent as his mother bent and stretched around the swell of him. He would be born from one dark fluidity into another. The lake would contain the mother's and baby's wails in birth, and the father would not need to—and could not anyway—spank the newborn.

Akim and Leya persevered, and when they had finished all their labor, they would not say they were lacking in anything. As the heights of water above their heads deepened, everything grew much calmer. They lost the light, but they gained the quiet. They lost the seasons, but they gained constancy. They lost the society, but they gained control. Everything was made up. They had all they could imagine ever wanting. They had their house. They had their son. Their son was developing every day, growing into the place, coming to love his home,

his homelife, his hometown, like normal. They were set. The rest, for their boy, could wait until it came, all of it, in its good time, as it was meant to be. That is what mattered most and made it all worth it. Everything as it was supposed to be. Their plans coming to fruition. Their hard work paying off.

When he was school-aged, Beor traveled constantly between realms—the one he knew and the one set above him that he was learning, now that it was permitted to him and now that he was big enough to swim to the heavens on his own. He sampled the similarities and differences between the two. In one place, the dirt wrinkled from too little moisture. In the other, his fingertips wrinkled from too much moisture. When he stood on the dry ground of Colorado, he could see so far in every direction that it was like he was inside the sky, jutting into it off the hard earth like a hoodoo. It was the same in the water, though, when he wandered on the outskirts of town, his feet creating clouds of fine particles. And then, when looking up from dry land, he could see rays of light speared through cracks in the clouds. But also, in the shallows of the lake, the light shafted through the water, slanted in the current. The difference came down to feelings he got on his skin. Up top, everything was light. Papa Jorel had a new home in a new Sapinero under a new sun every day. The schools in Gunnison were bright and modern. Beor felt no pressure on his limbs or face. He could open his eyes wide and fill his lungs until the center of his chest popped with satiation. His legs could move so swiftly that they demanded this stretching of his eyes and lungs. He came from a people of the desert and felt more comfortable in his own skin, more grounded, more at home inside the dry air.

Akim and Leya never crossed the interface and remained at the bottom of the lake. Beor had not returned since he married, shortly after high school. In those formative years, he became an established part of PB&J, which had been Piemacum, his, and then Jehona's nickname from

their classmates by the time they graduated. As they turned into young adults, the three largely replaced Papa Jorel's responsibility for getting supplies to Beor's parents. This would be the first time he had seen his parents in six years. On this, his twenty-fifth birthday, they would be waiting.

"They will be glad to see you," Piemacum assured him, resting his hand on Beor's hunched shoulder across from him in the canoe. Beor was leaning forward, his arms locked against the narrow seat underneath him, as if he could see his family's home through the bottom of the boat.

"They'll be *anxious* to see me."

"Your parents are good people. I take all my students to meet them when we're down there. They're always receptive to divers exploring the town."

"Yeah, 'cause they're proud. No one in my family has ever idolized our house the way they do." Beor needed to blink but was not done staring. "Do you think they'll want me to take possession?"

Piemacum shook his head. "Only they can answer."

"They've not said anything?"

"No one has spoken of it." Like a hex, that silenced them for a moment.

Then, Beor snorted. "You don't think they'd offer it to me sheerly out of *pity*, do you?"

"Hey, forget about Cy. That whole situation was a sham. When someone promises you something, you don't ask what you have to do to ensure it. You can't get what's promised from effort. You're a man now; it's yours."

“But people do try to make you earn what they’ve promised you, don’t they? I mean, don’t they? And then, to keep earning it afterwards. What if they give it to me to *make* me a man today, huh? I just feel like I’ve been put to shame.”

“You tell yourself that. Or you repeat something you’ve heard. I don’t know, but that’s all made-up garbage. Can’t you see it’s a bunch of bogus lies? You’re only human.”

“I’m really scared, P.”

Beor gazed at the shifting facets of the lake. Piemacum opened his satchel and pulled out his telescopic fishing rod and lure box. Beor watched the movements of his friend’s hands. After Piemacum thread the line through the eye, the plastic lure in the shape of a small fish seemed to float there for a moment and then got swept into the vortex of Piemacum whipping the fish around and around in order to twist the line. Piemacum spoke gently to Beor while he switched open his pocket-knife and cut the excess line after the lure knot.

“Your grandfather says your family puts too much into what they’ve made. Like that’s all they have to make something of themselves. But what they make is only as good as their imaginations allow. Papa Jorel always laughs at that point.” Piemacum smiled to himself as he secured the sections of his rod, extending the lure beyond the side of the canoe. The little fish’s deflecting reflection on the surface of the water looked like a fish swimming in the water. “Half the time, we don’t even know what we need. Our imaginations end up limiting what we could have. Defeats the whole purpose.” Piemacum cast his line. He checked his friend’s face. “You’ve descended into this lake, like the sun and moon into the mountains, ten thousand times. Go; hear what they say. You’ve heard it all before. Then, you’ll be done with this build-up.”

Beor kept his knees bent but rose. Piemacum batted Beor’s calf and pointed at the end of his line in the water. “Slip off the other side of the boat, won’t you?”

“If you promise not to catch any of my childhood friends.” Beor put himself out of the canoe, careful not to teeter his friend too much, and submerged.

He stopped a few feet below water to adjust. The coolness was welcome, especially around his groin and under his armpits. He stilled himself. The sound under water was the same as listening through a wall with an ear to a glass. He could understand the movement of sound in this way. The soundwaves crashed through the water and shook the particles. They became the voice. The delivery was pure vibration. All noise equalized; the imperceptible or ignored became prominent. Every syllable, accented. Every phrase ended with an exclamation point. Vibrations were thick around his skull, and all on the background of white noise. He tipped himself and swam off toward town.

The bottom of the lake was murkier than it had been. He struggled to stick his landing and gain his bearings. He would never have believed the two-story, double-porched Sapinero Hotel could come upon him unexpectedly, but suddenly, its paleness loomed before him. He touched the vertical board siding, which had been freshly installed over hewn logs not long before the townspeople received notice about the dam. He looked up along the old power pole in front of the hotel but could barely read the signs advertising the hotel’s featured amenities. Probably, he could make out the words only because he already knew what they said. One sign pronounced, “Modern Cabins, Tub Baths, Steam Heat, Electricity, Dining Room,” and a higher, newer, arrow-shaped one bragged, “Telephone.” So much that we think is investment is waste.

Beor slogged his way to the homestead. The railing of the front porch came into view, and the milky impression of his mother behind it, looking to and fro, the soft fabric of her skirt just as restless. He was struck by how much older she looked, calling her in his mind for a

moment “no . . . no.” Her hair lifted and lilted like white flame. The red veins of those in high-elevation mountain cabins streamed through her cheeks.

He climbed the porch stairs. “Mama.”

“Son.” She smiled and stretched one hand to him, flattening the other against the railing. “You’ve finally arrived.”

He stepped up to her. They each made gestures toward touching one another before they actually did. He cupped her face in his hands, as if to preserve it somehow, to harbor it. Leya squinted up at him and squeezed his wrist.

“Here I am,” Beor answered. “I know you’ve been waiting for me.” He could never have seen his parents cry and was astonished in kindergarten to witness streams of water coming out of a body—from girls’ eyes, or boys’ penises in what he was learning about a room for a “bath.”

Leya spread her arms for a hug. Surely, her rib cage had shrunk. “Happy birthday, my son,” she said. “Welcome home. Akim!” she called over her shoulder, at the house. “He’s made it at last!”

Beor released her, and she slid her arm through his. They turned together, and Beor saw that the front door was missing and that the door frame was slanting severely to their right. A dark gap ran between the porch and the house, and Beor followed it all the way to the right side of the house. The gable end leaned into two hand-hewn trunks, whose bases were sinking into the muck of the side yard. Having completely forgotten that he had led her right along with him, he nearly jumped out of his skin when his mother’s voice at his shoulder explained the house was propped up by them. She pointed at the jury-rigged system as though he may not have noticed it. But he looked at her instead and then saw his father standing not far behind them. Akim extended his hand to shake. Beor cupped it gingerly, weighing and measuring it. Akim

squeezed more firmly and yanked, for them to come inside the house. They walked back and stepped wide to cross the threshold, Beor holding his mother's hand and elbow and shooting another glance along the front of the house before entering.

Leya led Beor to the settee, gestured for him to sit, and wriggled up so close that he barely had any claim left. Akim stationed himself in the armchair. Slits opened in the fabric to expose stuffing. The parents looked at their son, who looked down at his empty hands. Suddenly, no one had anything to offer.

Leya patted her son's knee and pushed up off it. She crossed into the dining area. On the sideboard, which had been moved farther into the room to clear the imposing wall, a plate of stacked kitty roll ups—hand-shaped balls of sweetened peanut butter, coconut, dates, and walnuts dipped in chocolate—had been set. She raised and released one, wafting her hands downward on either side of it. It rushed away from her, toward Beor.

“Catch it in your mouth, like my little boy.”

Even though he was nauseated by disorientation, Beor waited, his focus swimming in the moment, as it made its way over to him, and did as requested. He turned back to his father, chewing. He was debating whether the house was actively moving, or whether his expectancy of it was so strong that the sensation came instead from his overactive imagination. But surely, this house and its foundation had been rock-solid. He kept having to pause in his chewing.

A Kokanee salmon swam through a window with its school passing by on the road in front of the house. Its mouth elongated upward, like it had its nose in the air and could not be bothered with concepts of rudeness or limits. Its body was marbled in pink and black, and the dorsal fin extended in a regal train beyond its humped back. The salmon coursed under an undulating curtain, which was so tattered as to appear as fingers releasing the fish. It snatched

and swallowed Akim's kitty roll up right in front of him. The tail swept near Akim's shoulder, and the cloth at the top of Akim's sleeve wafted out from under the shoulder piece, where it had been tucked. The sleeve had torn away from the shoulder hem and billowed out to expose skin as pale yellow as the belly of a brown trout.

His mother carried back with her Beor's wedding photo and asked after his bride, using his thigh to help her regain the low seat. He grasped her waist and handled the answer as best he could. She was so stiff. He responded more easily when she switched to her photo of Cheyenne on the side table next to her, but she disliked hearing that Cheyenne was receiving no Spanish.

"Mama, Cheyenne's *English* is barely understandable. Between Algonquian from his Uncle Piemacum and Albanian from his mother, I think we're flooding his poor brain." Beor smiled, but she took his hand and squeezed urgency back into him.

"But what will he have from me?"

"Well." He willed himself not to look around the room. "Me." This made her quiet. He filled the void with, "And all that I have because of you." He thought he should kiss her cheek when he said this, but it also seemed like the most disingenuous gesture he could make right then. She set down the picture of Cheyenne and looked around the room herself. A strip of loosened wallpaper waved from the corner—the back flowered with buds of black mold.

Akim pointed at Beor and asked what position he now held at the place that had been his high-school job. In that instant, Beor felt what must be meant by "awash" with the distance between them. He had not realized the starting point of this conversation could have set him so far back. From there, he might have to explain all the entry-level jobs, stacked upon each other like bricks that built nothing. He could not conclude that his strife had rewarded no redemption; that would be incredible to his father.

“Just tell us what it is that you do, Beor,” his mother suggested, resting her icy fingers on the logo of his uniform shirt. “What gets all your time and attention?” The photos of Jehona and Cheyenne smiled at him from tarnished frames—one worse than the other. His mother’s eyes beseeched him to have the right words.

“Well, I just finished up a job—”

“What kind of a thing is that to say?” his father interrupted. Leya winced and broke eye contact with Beor. “A man never finishes his work. That is what a man is, what a man’s life is. Proud provider and?” At this, Akim held out his hand to Beor, who knew his father was requesting something from him, not offering something to him.

“Honorable character.”

“And yet, you answer without being able to look at me. Is this the attitude with which you raise your own son? Is this why he struggles to speak?”

If Beor were topside, he could produce the pressure-releasing sound of exasperation, like a can of beer cracking open, giving up, ready to spill. Being where he was, he allowed buoyancy to lift his arms in suspended submission. “I don’t know what to tell you, Dad. I just don’t know what to say. I’m at such a loss here.”

“Is that a joke? Are you being smart?”

“Now, now,” Leya said, flagging down the attention of the two men. “Every child fulfills its name.” She chuckled lightly and wiped the side of her mouth with her finger. “Piemacum told me when Cheyenne was born, he knew he had to declare the baby’s name, but he had no idea what its name was. So, he asked the baby, and Cheyenne’s response earned him his name.”

“That’s the thing,” Beor continued. “I do feel like that’s *my* place: sand and rock and shrub, with wind and water wearing it all down, washing it all away. I should be the *master* of

that. But honestly, Dad, I think we're both gonna have to adjust our expectations here." Beor waited for his father's face to relent, but it was stone. "If nothing else then, at least today I've finally reached the age when I get to start asking you who you're providing for, and how you're handling it."

Beor did twist then, kiss his mother's cheek, and murmur his love to her. Leya smiled at him and for him. They stood together, and when she was fully erect, she waggled his hand behind his back as he turned to face Akim. His eyes warmed. These were the hardest times to breathe. "Since you're the man I never was, I think you should give your house to the son you never had."

"No one said anything about this house," Akim said, grasping the armrests.

"I just did."

"No one has ever refused this house."

"Now, *that's* funny, Dad, 'cause I'm pretty sure that's what *you* just did."

Leya went with him outside. "Beor, I want to send you away with something." She put her hand on his chest. "Please remember: all anger comes from losing or being denied what you believe you deserve. As with any response, it's a choice." He raised her palm to his lips, kissed it, and closed her fingers over the keepsake. "Won't you come back?" she asked him from the stairtop, their fingertips pinching each other's.

"For you, Mama. But don't you want to come and meet Cheyenne?"

She let go of him and put her arms around the post on the side of the stairs, resting her cheek against it. "I have nothing for him."

"You have you."

“No, I just have this.” She looked at him with one eye—the other concealed behind the post. And then, she looked beyond him into the dissipating view around the front yard. He turned to leave the place she could not see past.

“You always were able to walk away from this house,” she said.

“I wish you admired that,” he said over his shoulder, not wanting to know she had already gone back to it.

Still damp, Beor stood in his own front yard, in front of his mobile home. The air had changed. The clouds moved swiftly from the west like a herd of pronghorn: their bellies dark; the moon backlighting their hind quarters, shoulders, and necks. Two rainbow trout dangled from Beor’s hooked fingers. Each as wide as his leg calf. Birthday gifts from Piemacum. The breeze flowed between the wet layers of his hair and under the hem of his untucked shirt, cooling his scalp and lower back. A raindrop so cold it should have been snow splattered the corner of his mouth. A few drops hit the ground. Wisps of dust twisted into the air and spun apart, as if a stranger had just passed by unseen and left a wake in his trail.

He heard Cheyenne calling Jehona, with no reply. Beor saw Jehona pass one lit window, flipping the dark rivulets of her hair. In another window, the boy flashed, and she turned on her heel, sucking in her cheeks and widening her eyes.

“What, Cheyenne? What?” she cried. “What is it? What is *so* amazing? Yes, it’s a goathead. There are, like, fifty million of those, everywhere. They’re gonna get in the carpet. It’s gonna happen. We bring them in on our shoes.” She spread ten taut fingers just away from her cheekbones. The heat from her palms must be felt on her face. “You always come running up as

if you're gonna share something *so* astounding, and then, it's nothing special. It's not that important. It's just not, *djali im.*"

Beor let the storm door slap shut behind him.

"Daddy!" Cheyenne ran to hug his father's thighs and was about to show him the goathead seed when he noticed the pair of trout. Trumped, Cheyenne looked up to Beor, who nodded his assent for the boy to take the fish to his mother. Cheyenne two-fisted them on his shoulder.

"Mom! Mom!" She gripped the edge of the kitchen sink. In the window's reflection of her face, her eyes closed. "Mom!" With Cheyenne right at her side, she spun toward him and crouched.

"Cheyenne! Cheyenne! Cheyenne!" she bellowed. The boy's mouth was as wide as those of the strung fish, and they—almost as long as he—sank into a closed quotation mark on the floor. "What did we just talk about?" she asked.

He gasped and hoisted them aloft again, straining to restore their glory. "Fish!"

"Wow. You just don't— *Faleminderit.*" She took the fish and let them flop into the sink. Cheyenne ran from the room. Jehona looked over her shoulder at Beor and said, "So, you made 25," her face then twisting away from Beor's as he offered a kiss. He squeezed her shoulders instead. He made his way around the kitchen table, casting glances to confirm that was all the recognition his birthday was going to get. He noted again a blank sheet of paper on the refrigerator door that had been there for months. He had tried lemon juice on it to no effect but still believed Cheyenne had used disappearing ink on it.

"Where'd you get the fish?" Jehona asked.

"P. A gift."

She nodded. "That's nice."

"I thought so. I also thought it would be nice to clean them with Cheyenne. Would it be nice for you, if I made dinner?"

"Sure. Always," she said and headed to the living room along the other side of the table.

"All right, boy! Where are ya? Come here. We're gonna clean us some fish." He saw the back of his wife's head disappear below the back of the sofa, and he heard the herd of bison stampeding from the bedrooms down the hall.

Later, when he had cleared the dishes, tucked the boy into bed, and flicked off the lights in the kitchen, Beor returned to Jehona slumped in the sofa with her head resting on one of her shoulders and the remote control drooping from her slack fingers. Her wrist curved in the position it had landed. She had been passing in and out of sleep. He stepped between her and the television and grinned.

"What are you doing?" her voice scratched. Her brow crinkled as she looked at him out of the slit of the one eyelid that managed to open, into the light of the room.

"Nothing?" he trilled, mocking innocence.

"What *are* you doing?"

He continued grinning.

"Move," she said. She pushed herself up onto an elbow and leaned to see around him.

"Okay." He wedged himself in next to her, slipped his fingertips between two of her buttons to stroke the peach-fuzz on her stomach, and whispered into her ear. She rolled her eyes and turned up the volume on the TV. The maneuver of her lifting arm drew his hand out of her shirt.

"You wanna do anything?" he asked, leaning forward to make eye contact.

She muted the sound. “Yeah, I do. I wanna watch TV.”

“Anything else?” He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, ran his finger along its helix, and massaged her lobe. He raised his eyebrows.

She pulled her head from his grasp. “Get serious.”

“I am. I’d like to know that you still love me, now that I’m a homeless old man.”

“You think I don’t show you I love you?”

“Well, it’s not the only way you can show me, but it’s the clearest sign.”

She restored the volume and turned her attention back to the television.

He said to the side of her face, “I really don’t think you heard me.”

“I’m just tired of hearing us. All of us. I don’t wanna hear anything that any of us has to say right now. I wanna hear the TV.” She nodded, as if she agreed that someone had said the right thing.

“I’ve offered solutions, ideas . . . Why don’t you ever wanna listen to any of my suggestions?”

“I only brought up stuff in the past to point out that none of this is what it’s supposed to be. But the worst part was watching you try to fix it like some project. If you’re just there to be *helpful*, then I’m talking to the wrong person. You can’t make it good. You can’t just speak into a void and have it be.”

“What isn’t good?”

“All of it.” Then, dropping her chin onto her chest, she mumbled, “I was deceived.”

“What did you say?” he asked.

She tilted back her head, looked at the ceiling, and enunciated, “I deluded myself. It didn’t come out like what I was going for.” She tossed the remote control at him, got up, and

went outside, through the sliding glass door. Reflexively, he threw the remote control against the arm of the sofa. He did not want it. But then, he had to stretch and retrieve it in order to muzzle the yapping television. He slapped both hands against the seat cushions and let the darkness in the room lay itself down on top of him.

Jehona's family left Albania just as the protests were beginning and before any violence or even aggression. They came to the desert—where Ha-Shem has been known to draw people in order to woo them—out of a sense of romantic attraction. In her new high school, where she felt as foreign as everyone else, she admired Beor's rootedness, hardiness, survivorship. She nicknamed him Shrub and tousled his hair to indicate how he had been shaped by wind and water, like the plants, rocks, everything exposed on any surface of that tiered desert floor. She came from a people of water, and her family's culture felt familiar to him. She felt like home at a time when he was looking to define that. Together, they were born from the element of water, absorbed by the element of earth.

Beor saw one enormous tongue of fire leap in the backyard. He got up to peer outside. He thought he saw Jehona ablaze and ran out onto the back deck. But from there, he could tell it was a dress on fire, an empty but heavy dress. It rose out of the steel drum—the stiff, long sleeves bobbing in the heat. Orange flames fluttered out of the neckline. A whip of light ripped upward. It took several moments for him to recognize the wedding gown and veil. He looked at Jehona, who watched the emblazoned effigy with the same fierceness with which it smoldered. The contours of her face flickered with light and dark. He approached her as he would an elk in a valley, stopping well away, hunching, compromising comfort for stillness.

“Jehona?”

“*Po?*”

“Is that—” He looked again at the burning barrel, with its rusted holes glowing here and there. The material collapsed inside. A few squares of black-rimmed tulle swirled between hot and cold currents. “*Was* that your wedding dress?”

“You noticed?”

“What’s going on?”

“Not much. I’ve been burning stuff around the house to see whether I would miss it. You don’t seem to. Cheyenne doesn’t either. I want to value our things as little as you two do.”

“What stuff?”

“*Nuk e di*. I can’t remember everything, which I guess is sort of proof that you’re both right. It doesn’t matter. I was keeping tally on the fridge, every time you or Cheyenne showed any evidence of missing anything. So far, *zero*. It’s weird. I thought it was all something, all really something, but it’s nothing.” She shrugged. She started to walk past him. She squeezed his lifted hand and jiggled it to loosen his arm. “Let’s not fuss over it. It’s not worth it.”

“Well, that’s just the icing on my birthday cake today,” he said to her back as she climbed the deck stairs. “You know, I’ve sacrificed everything to provide all this worthless junk? Everything I do—all this to make you happy.”

“But all that focus, Beor, it’s too much pressure. It just sets me up to fail. They’re not my accomplishments. And when I don’t respond with just the right amount of enthusiasm or gratitude, then you feel like you’ve done it all for nothing. I can’t fake satisfaction for your satisfaction anymore.”

“What, so, you’re going to bed?” He grabbed two railing posts at his waist. “*Të lutem më ndihmo. Të lutem.*”

Jehona stopped at the door, without turning, and described to the reflection of her face in the glass how his sleeping face, when it was six inches away from hers in bed, looked pooched against the pillow. She said she knew hers would look the same when she fell asleep. They would face one another with those relaxed, dismal expressions, like two dumb animals gazing and snorting at each other. “*Më falni*. I just don’t want to do it anymore. That. This. I’m no help to you, and you’re no help to me. We’re no help to each other.” At that, she looked right at him—a sure sign of late that she was making a request, that he was granting a permission. “*Natën e mirë,*” she said. It was the third time she had left him that night, he noticed.

He followed her inside to look for clues that would help him remember. His forefingers cast about, pointing here-and-there tentatively, pulling back. The only thing he noticed was the blank paper gone from the refrigerator door. He found its ash in the kitchen sink.

In the morning, Beor padded across the carpet in Cheyenne’s room to the convertible stock-car bed. He studied his son, who smiled and giggled despite closed eyes.

“You big faker,” Beor said and poked his son’s belly. Cheyenne squeaked and rolled away from his father. Then, he turned, glared, and growled at Beor, who swept him up—blanket and all—to tussle on the car-racing rug. Beor yelped under Cheyenne. A thumb-sized wrecker had jabbed him in the back. He lifted Cheyenne, whose tummy crested out from under his nightshirt and rose above Beor like a half-moon, which he zerbeted before standing the boy before him.

“What say we go to Zayde’s today?” he asked.

“Does Mom need a break?”

“It’s just that he won’t get to see you as much pretty soon, what with you starting kindergarten.”

“Mom says it can’t come soon enough.”

“ ‘Mom, Mom, Mom.’ Let’s *us* take a break.”

Jorel lived on the highest and quietest switchback road of the hill. This meant he could see the farthest distance across the reservoir, maybe even the most distant possible point Akim might emerge. He had converted a riding lawn mower into a go-cart for his grandson’s birthday gift. Beor drove in loops on the street while Jorel comforted Cheyenne in his lap on the porch.

“I didn’t know it was his birthday,” Cheyenne cried. “Do you think I made him madder?”

“He knows you didn’t know; he didn’t expect you to. Otherwise, he would have told you, right? He’s not mad because of you.”

“I know why he’s mad. Daddy’s brain is on fire. Inside his head.”

“You can see that?” Cheyenne twisted around and nodded. He thumbed his great-grandfather’s crow’s foot. Jorel asked, “Behind his eyes?”

“More like in the flashes of white.” Cheyenne demonstrated by darting his eyes. He grabbed the man’s short sleeve. “Mommy’s been getting rid of stuff the same way.” Cheyenne then leaned against Jorel, watching Beor. “She should have said. She should have helped me.”

“Why not say that to her, then? Cry these tears for her?”

“*Jo*. Talking to Mommy’s the same as yelling across the lake.”

Beor slid to a stop in front of the house, disappearing inside a sheet of dust that the wind pulled over his back, up and away. He got off, coughing, bending over, bracing himself against his knees at the bottom of the steps. Jorel whispered into Cheyenne’s ear to go and pat his father

lightly on the back. Cheyenne rubbed the tickle of Zayde's whisper out of his earlobe as he crossed the porch. He climbed halfway down the stairs to reach Beor's shoulder blade.

Jorel lifted his voice. "Did you go, Beor? Did you see him? My son. Your father."

Beor nodded. He took a seat on the steps. Cheyenne looked from one man to the other, wide-eyed and wide-mouthed. Beor hooked his finger and pulled on Cheyenne's inside cheek. When Cheyenne play-bit him, Beor drew back his hand, bending his finger to conceal its top half, and feigning the loss of the body part.

"You know, we're only one mile away from each other as the crow flies," Jorel said. "But for some reason that I can no longer fathom, there is a world of difference between here and there."

"There has to be. It took one entire day of only six to separate water from sky, and another whole one to make the creatures for each."

"Yes, but if it was so difficult to separate them, then they must have been similar to start with, right? And both animals being able to be made at the same time? That suggests the same."

"At least, he still has Mama. Birds of a feather. Two by two. They're survivors."

"Hm. Your family's been building up this deception for far too long that somehow it's your time. That you've been growing toward this. I regret how I've contributed to that whole assembly of nonsense." Jorel shook his head. "It came to me, when you were choking on all that dust just now—something your grandmother, Beor, and your great-grandmother, Cheyenne, once said. No matter how carefully we craft them, lies do that to us. They surround us and trap us. Like dust devils. We spend so much of what we're given, trying to settle them, to somehow make them true. We insist on the lies, because we hold dear to what they might provide. But we end up having to protect them, and they never help us defend them. They stand there and let us

languish. Far from solving our problems, we have to take on theirs, too. Such a waste of our resources. Our devotion is more precious than that.” When Jorel inhaled sharply, the sound betrayed a congested nose. He fiddled it vigorously, his finger a violin bow. “You’re trying to make the invisible visible, Beor. To show you’re not alone, that you’re loved, that you’ve been gifted. But you’re all that’s needed to see that. I see all that when I look at you. If you try to recreate love, you’ll just pervert what’s already done. We share so much with our creators, and it was all meant to be enjoyed. Then, it gets hard to tell who we’re glorifying. Before we know it, it’s more like us, more about us, more to us.”

“Why’d you let me go down there, Papa, if you knew what was gonna happen?”

“You knew just as well as I. The same thing happened to you that’s happened to every other generation in this family. Every man, at the designated time, receives his parents’ legacy and realizes the heritage they’ve passed down to him. You no less than anyone else.”

“I no less? I no less? I think you may be the one who’s deceived here, Papa. You should know. The house. It’s falling down. It’s all falling down!”

Cheyenne put his hand on his father’s forearm. “Don’t get burned up, Daddy.” Beor steadied his breathing. Then, he reassured Cheyenne, in a softer voice, that Zayde might take him for a ride on the go-cart, if he stayed there. Cheyenne looked hopefully upward, his fingertips drawing from Beor’s arm. Beor kissed the top of his head. He ascended and kissed Jorel’s forehead and the *mezuzah*. He smoothed Cheyenne’s hair and headed down the road. Jorel held out his arm to his grandson, who was about to leave his sight.

“Beor, please,” he called. “What we worship, it’s life-changing. It makes our decisions.”

Cheyenne raced after his father, stretched his arms for a hug, clung around Beor's neck, dangling there. After a moment, Beor squeezed his good-bye into his son's biceps and pulled them ever so gently downward.

Beor spent the rest of the morning gathering gear and driving to Paonia. Jehona taught him in high school how to drive. Never did he imagine he could experience the terror and thrashing of drowning, until he drove a vehicle. One should not be allowed to be swept away in rapids like that, to cut so easily through the air, but afterward, he kept to jobs involving driving.

In town, he stopped into a new restaurant there on Grand Avenue called The Diner to grab a bite. He ordered a chicken fried steak combo plate with over-medium eggs and a substitute of their homemade cinnamon roll pancakes. As the waitress, who was otherwise very nice, removed his platter from her tray to serve him, she knocked over the salt shaker she had brought to him for his table. Having removed the salt-and-pepper shakers earlier to fill them at the end of her shift and then hurrying now to return them to him, she had neglected to tighten the top of the salt shaker, and the contents tumbled in dunes across his lunch. The plate still in her grasp at the level of his shoulder, she and he both looked at the upended salt shaker sticking out of the ruins like a chimney rock. He was assuring her it was all fit and proper before she started apologizing, even before she started blushing across her chest. He did not wait for more. He left laughing loudly enough that she took his money without argument and did not encourage him to stay and let her try to make it right.

With the summer monsoon ahead of him in the west, he put in his bright yellow Mohawk canoe on the North Fork Gunnison River and balanced standing for a moment as the storm

grumbled at him—each of them resolute. Cheyenne had christened the boat *The Banana Peel* and spotted the hull with banana brand stickers.

Beor drew his paddle dripping from the water. It sprinkled his denim as the blade crossed his lap from port to starboard, starboard to port. Beor sat stern, balanced against his hammock and tarp, pot and matches, hatchet and lantern, shovel and toilet paper, all in the bow. He squinted against the glare. The low sun shot through the trees. A sheet of moths billowed mid-air. The tree cover flattened the foothills into green geometric shapes. The yellow light sections on their heights locked against the blue dark sections at their bases. The naked mesas had wrinkly, brown-gray elephant skin. The land opened wide to swallow the long draft of river. Beor glided down the gullet of the North Fork Valley.

The recent rain caused this spew from the rocky mountains to be swifter than he should really be trying to handle alone. Yet he had not gone three miles when his boat slowed to a gradual halt in the middle of the current and remained there. By paddling with all his might, he was able to draw forward a few feet, but as soon as he rested, the boat receded back to where it had stopped at first. He thought he had felt and could navigate every type of fluid dynamic, but he had never experienced a full river refusing to run. He did not know what to do with it. Finally, he maneuvered hard for the bank, but at that angle, the weird water tipped and dunked him. When he resurfaced, neither the boat nor any of his goods had floated away from him. He righted his gear and clambered with it in tow onto the bank. He stood a minute to catch his breath and to slow his dripping, long enough to become more observant of his surroundings. It appeared as if there might be a declination in the water just downstream. He pushed the hair off his face and walked along the bank to investigate.

“What in the world—”

Sure enough, the water came to a head and flowed back under itself, such that a ten-foot expanse of dry ground was exposed before the river continued on its merry way. Beor returned to his canoe, walked it along the shallows near the bank, pulled it over the water's edge, and began dragging it across the dirt. He stopped when he recognized lettering scratched wide and tall in the earth with a stick: בעור. He almost dropped the boat upon reading his name, but instead, he dragged it straight through the middle of the writing and back into the water on the other side, setting off once more. But he was not allowed another three miles before he was stopped again, staring at the dark line just ahead of him in the water that he knew would prove to be a second declination. He surrendered right away this time—sliding into the water, pulling the boat off to the shallows, walking it down, and starting toward his name. This time, as he moved forward to cross, the lettering blackened, glowed orange, and ignited into a low burn. He did drop the boat, even raising it a bit higher before doing so to make it a more dramatic gesture. He scooped water with his pot onto the flames until he had a wide enough space to pass, smearing the cinders into the mud with the bottom of his canoe.

When he lifted his feet out of the water to climb back into the boat, he noticed his blood sugar was starting the downward dive toward his stomach smarting more than his temper, which usually made his temper give one final loud burst before he lost all heart. Therefore, the third time, he sat there for a long while, considering his options, not really wanting to move anymore anyway. He recognized Hotchkiss off the starboard side, and he spotted a brightly colored climbing rope coiled on the shore with two girls playing in the early evening air not too far beyond it. He caught their attention and waved them over to the water's edge, explaining that he was lodged on a rock to avoid alarming them and that he couldn't move. He asked whether they

could cast one end of the rope to him and tie off the other end near them, so he might free himself without getting soaked.

“The problem is—,” one girl started saying.

“What?” he cried.

“The *problem* is,” she started again, “somebody’s probably already using that for something.” And the girls ran away, hand-in-hand, toward the people in their lives whose requests could be trusted.

“Huh,” he said to the third declination ahead of him. “That’s actually a really good point.” He had not thought of that. “Let the river go about its business. I’ll call it a day.” The water surged forward, and he lost his seating, toppling backward. But before he reached the point where his name was rapidly being erased out of the river’s bed, he managed to pull onto a shoal below the Delta County Fairgrounds.

The bow rubbed the sandbank. The feel of the floorboard changed from hollow buoyancy to solid heft that pushed against his soles. Stuffing his boots among his top and under quilts and rolling his boot cut jeans, he cast his bare feet into the drink. An American Dipper bird flew up from underwater and landed on a submerged rock. It stuck its head into the river and its tail into the breeze. A silver gilt of water streamed over its blue-gray nape and back. Emerging with an aquatic insect squirming at the tip of its beak, it paused to chomp. The current coursed around its belly and rump. Then, it dove and swam with splashes of its wings. Beor set his back to pulling his craft ashore and securing it to a narrowleaf cottonwood, which he patted twice. He made swift, light, and simple camp.

The crackling of the tinder grew louder than the flow of the river. Beor rubbed his hands and smiled at what he had created. He raised his arms to take it all upon himself. In the gathering

darkness, as he looked about what he wanted to imagine was the wilderness, his fire-cast shadow danced before him. He was about to sit down, but a branch from his gathered wood pile whooshed past him, through the air and straight onto the fire. Then, another lifted and flew into the fire. And another. Until all that he had collected was smoldering in the burn. Up out of the ground across the fire from Beor, a shrub pushed into the open until it was fully grown, and one more right next to it. The last one was much closer to him, such that he jumped out of the way to give it plenty of clearance. And a good thing, too, because each of them burst into flame, cracking and popping within torrents of fire. Beor shrank into a ball as the three began falling out of the ground, but they were extinguished immediately on contact with the earth. He did not open back out into sitting cross-legged until his fire had returned to a manageable blaze.

He heated his can of Dinty Moore beef stew, which he planned to scoop into his mouth on Fritos. But the can fell off its rock and into the fire, and his bag of Fritos was full of ashes instead of chips when he opened it. He got out his peanut-butter-and-honey sandwiches folded into wax paper, which was fun to wad and ignite into fireballs. But the water had gotten to them that day, and so, he hucked them into the fire as well.

Faint sounds of singing and proclaiming nudged his back like lapping waves. He looked over his shoulder, in the direction of the empty fairgrounds. Picking his way through the brush, he found a footpath between the fences of the fairgrounds and a neighboring field. This dumped him out where Hotchkiss Avenue turns into 3rd Street. A short distance to his left, two men waded in the dust of parking lot gravel pooling into the lane.

“Last call, last night!” they yelled, a small Baptist church behind them. The double-doors gobbled worshippers and belched organ music into the royal purple twilight. Wailing came from the consumed. Shoving his fists into his fleece vest pockets and intending to stroll past, he got

caught by the faces he could see inside—beaming and intent. He was startled back to himself when one of the hawkers yelled out again, “Last call, last night!”

Beor called back, across the road, “You’re sure making a hullabaloo.”

“Can’t keep it to yourself,” said one man. The other, much younger and in rolled shirtsleeves, asked if Beor was coming to the revival.

“You can’t schedule something like that. It wells up.” Beor indicated this sensation with his arms. “From inside.” But he felt like a monkey scratching his ribcage. He dropped his arms and shrugged. “Otherwise, you’re worshipping worship.”

The first one put his hands in his trouser pockets. “Could be. But it’s not like it’s a surprise either, like it sneaks up on you. Worship don’t just happen on its own; you build up to it. Takes preparation. Ya gotta get the hamster running in the wheel.” He loosened his tie, took off his suit jacket, and folded it over his arm. “Gotta be aware you’re setting out to do it. Speaking of which.” He turned to enter the sanctuary, looking back once at the younger man who stood there still, waiting on Beor’s response. But Beor put his hands back inside his vest and looked up the lane.

“What can I say? It’s not about personal satisfaction—what ‘you get.’ That’s a by-product.” The young man patted his sides, bounced once on his knees, then waved at Beor, and followed the first. The two pulled the doors closed.

Beor could still hear the congregation and recognized the psalm they were singing. He murmured, *The earth is filled with your checed. Let me be. Let me be.* A spiral of air carried his comment to the tops of the trees, picked up the whispers of the leaves, and moved with a twist toward the stars in the well of the sky. The constellations eddied. Surely, he was closer out there. Or already a part. Of. That’s why he always came out here—to drink in the communion. A body

could not do that at work. Leisure being his only option right now, he had thought he might as well seek after pleasure. But this, too, felt useless, like another big production. He stubbed his toe at the dirt and retreated.

Approaching his campsite, he stopped to study it: the fire melting into the air in clear fluid streams; the water pushing into the earth at the muddied edge. This camp placement was his footprint set among the broad prehistoric footprints in the sediment at the brink of the Western Interior Seaway, so long ago settling over the land. Water creatures had swum above everyone's heads here once. The dinosaurs, then looming, now underfoot. Layers floated atop each other, waiting exposure from forces moving across the surface. A dove-spirit hovered thrice above the living above the deep. Each time, ordering chaos, quelling threat. Beor's craftsmanship nestled inside another's, like Cheyenne's head once in Jehona's womb against Beor's hand. We are all someone else's labor. His family and all his promises lay across the river, to the south.

We are not more, and live on nothing more, than covenant. Inside of promise, we live and move and have our being. Death is devoting oneself to lies. This effort to create and control a provisional source only isolated him. Lessons the first people learned, and here was Beor learning them for himself. A weakness of humans is having to learn all there is to know and understand all over again, starting from the beginning, with each and every birth. This is also a strength. It *was* time for Beor to be borne—to lower himself to dust that air and water might lift him, to survey all he had been given. Worship was always first, even though he had not realized.

Beor tended his healthy fire, got out his thermal underwear, and removed his fleece, boots, shirt, undershirt. He lifted his chest to beam at the moon—a vibrant woman who turned sharply, her face, or belly, or backside. The arching of his back flattened his stomach, which he rubbed in pride and pleasure, his fingertips finding the long furrow in the center. If he could open

his ribs like doors, he could show how he consumed all—air, water, food into his blood. Yet his heart was stone, as cold and hard and pale as moon rock.

He bent forward too quickly to pull off his jeans, sending his blood rushing to his head; his feet got caught and confused. He keeled onto his side, with his backside beached. Stuck like that, he had to kick off his pants to regain his ground. He stood alone, yet he looked around to dare anyone to laugh, and to accuse someone of pushing. This was the only part of creation that had never been good.

The water reflected brilliant blooms of light in the blackest dark of night. The horizon evaporated. The entire world, a murky fluid. Only the dull shadowline of the trees divided the two realms. Wading out encircled him with stars—above, below, beside. His mouth gaped, sucking air like a fish flopping in the bottom of a boat. He soaped himself in the brisk current, until he was overcome with shivers. His fists tensed, and the sudsy bar bobbed away downstream.

His body was built with courage, designed to tend itself, to tell him how he should serve it. It loyally testified to a jealousy who made him this way. Adam's betrayal of death to his body meant Beor's body's betrayal of him unto death, returning to dust after being called and formed from it. All for the will-to-tell. To discern and decide what was to be his. To adore fruitfulness.

Beor cozied up to the blaze, rubbed warmth back into his muscles, and pulled on his skin-tight ivory thermals. He could always be new. A beginning again. Eternal jealousy makes its beloved immortal, for their unending pleasure. We do not meet our maker through death, but through life. The staying there: that was for his parents. The being born there, the growing there, the rising and surfacing, the cresting: all these were his.

He wanted to love his family through this. To cease building them up to more than they were, more than they could be. To stop believing he loved them as much as if he had made them or provided for them. To see them topple, and to let them see him made, supported, grounded. To quit working as if for them, for his value to them, for his identity, for the story people would tell about him. He wanted to love better than for his own delight.

A flaming branch shifted. Smoke engulfed him, smarted his eyes, filled his nostrils. He hacked and sidestepped to catch his breath, but the smoke was enamored. There was no calling it off, batting it away. Flashing pale in the pitch, he balled up his clothes, snatched at his hammock, and kicked sand at the collapsing campfire. He had decided it was enough.

Dressing as he fought his way back to the church, he snuck in the back door to find a phone. He wanted to get back to where he had been positioned. Back into the stream of love. He would be what he had been made to be—a heart of flesh.

“Well, I can barely hear you either,” Jehona said. “Where are you?”

“I’m not in a place to explain. It’s been a full day.”

“Sounds like it.”

“I’m sorry to add to yours. We should both be resting by now. But I don’t wanna stay here.”

“Is everything all right?”

“It is; I just didn’t know it was. I lost my head. I’m more tired than anything. More tired than I ever needed to be. Like you. You got Cheyenne?”

“No, he’s at Papa’s.”

“Then, will you borrow P’s truck? Come and get me and *Banana*? Out in front of Delta County Fairgrounds?”

“I’ll go ask.”

“J? Don’t send P. If you weren’t there, I would miss you.”

“All right.”

“J? I will see you. I promise. Do you?”

“All right.”

One way or another, we all return home, where we are borne. When Beor arrived, he would sit high on the hill, where the sun would warm his face as soon as it overcame the rock.

Still

Chidiebere Onwuachimba crouched on his knees next to the bathtub in which splashed two of his five children. They had gotten overly excited with their play and had so thoroughly drenched their father's shirt that he had removed it, cast it aside on the toilet, and draped a terry bath towel over his shoulder, tucking it as best he could into his leather belt. The three of them could hear Ariel Onwuachimba approaching on the staircase, as she shouted inquiries into what was going on up in that bathroom.

"Oh, you have done it now, children," Chidi said to their two- and five-year-old. "Your mother is coming, and you will have to tell to her what it is you have done to your father."

"Nuh-uh, Papa. Mama's got her own concerns, and you always say, 'This world is not of me,' " said Chinonso, the older child and their eldest son, in as deep of a voice as he could muster for quoting his *nnà*.

Chidi, sounding shock with his tongue and lips at his son's impudence, dipped the washcloth and wrung it out right over Chinonso's head, which made the boy laugh and cover his face. Chidi replied, "I do not say that for my children to think, 'This is not my father's world.' I say that for you to say the same, for yourselves. 'This world is not of me.' Now, repent. Prepare the way. She is at the door!"

The children stiffened their spines and leaned, until they could just see around their father's frame. They gazed with wide eyes at the open doorway. But Ariel had crawled in on her hands and knees and hidden herself behind Chidi. So, what the children saw were her hands, fashioned and fluttering like a pair of wings, rising slowly over their father's shoulder. Ariel stood gradually, raising them higher and higher.

"Look at your mother, children," Chidi said, when he saw Ariel above him. "She is a bird above the water."

The children smiled, clapped, and raised their arms to their parents. Ariel grasped and lifted their youngest daughter, Sabra. And Chidi helped Chinonso step over the wide porcelain edge onto the tile. He excused himself to go and say "good night" to baby Chizoba. Ariel must have finished the baby's bath in the kitchen and put him down in his crib in their bedroom. Chidi could get his night shirt while he was in there.

Ariel pinched her slip up around her hips, knelt, and worked the towel and then the lotion over the children's bodies. They tried to stand straight but were nudged to and fro. Ariel teased, pulling a little on Chinonso's wrist, "Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down." This made Sabra giggle, yank Chinonso's other wrist, and flash off to the bedroom they shared. "Heh-hey!" Chinonso laughed as he chased after her.

Like any other evening, Chidi would join Ariel, Chinonso, and Sabra again just as the children's naked toes and pajamaed and nightied bodies would be tucked out of sight. Chidi would recall a story from his village, while Ariel stroked Sabra's head and then went and rubbed light circles around Chinonso's palm or lower back. Chidi and Ariel would leave the door cracked and knock on the closed door of their elder daughters' bedroom, 12-year-old Nneka and 9-year-old Bithiah, whom they called "Bitty," because the littleness of their second had struck

them more when they already had their first, and to remind her that she would never be as big as the firstborn. The girls would have used the vacant bathroom to get themselves ready for bed and would now be reviewing their past day or discussing what was in store for the next. They would need only a quick kiss or hug and even the truncated “g’night,” sometimes while still chattering away, before wanting to be left again to themselves for debate.

Chidi and Ariel would sit on the side of their own bed and face the finished attic windows at the back of the three-story house up the hill, near Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, NY. From there, they could see out over downtown Troy, the Hudson River at its feet, and the Hudson Valley beyond. Chidi would hold Ariel’s hand with both of his on his thigh and squeeze it every now and then, so that she would look from the view into his face, and he could caress her face with his gaze. When he could see her back slump and her lips pooch, he would encourage her to go to bed, although this typically moved her to kneel next to the bed and begin praying.

Chidi would pass to the first floor of the house, which had been renovated into a restaurant, for a final night check of their property and security. Fufu Swallows and Soups offered his traditional Nigerian Igbo swallow meals, with a few accommodations for special requests from a devoted crowd. He would finally extinguish the terra cotta oil lamp, which burned on the counter near the center of the room for as long as he was awake, so anyone looking through the store windows could know and buzz their upstairs two-story residential unit. He would admire again, before he snuffed out the flame with a metal pot lid from the commercial kitchen, how light is the jewel of the room.

In the morning, Chidi returned from placing foodstuff orders, with some items in-hand that would not be delivered or that had been shipped from overseas. He passed the late

nineteenth-century houses on his street, each making manifest the life span of red brick. Bricks were crumbling into dust and chips. Some had been painted to slow the erosion. Others had been covered in siding, like his house. Clearly, money had been here once, with every house either two or three stories tall and footprints as wide as setbacks allowed. This crowding of plots created shadowy, mossy alleys between the houses, down which two people walking straight-on could not have passed one another. Occasionally, a house had open space next to it for a driveway to pass to side- or rear-parking, as with his place, but this meant the sacrifice of the big backyards no one would otherwise detect. Victorian builders had staggered the side windows, so no residents looked into their next-door neighbors' houses but had for themselves, instead, a close-up of an exterior wall. It was rare anymore for one of the houses to be single-family occupied, as the vast majority had long ago been split into duplexes with an upstairs and a downstairs unit. And throughout the neighborhood, the downstairs unit might have been transformed into a place of business—especially a restaurant.

It was trash day, which meant, like windy days, there would be even more bits of rubbish than usual flowering the landscape. Outside in Troy, garbage everywhere was a constant, like dirty dishes and laundry inside. As soon as Nneka and Bitty picked up all the little remnants from the sidewalk in front of Fufu and the parking lot behind, more would appear before the door closed behind them. It left one wondering, on days like this, with the sanitation workers obviously collecting and removing the trash, where it all came from. The air was ripe with the stench of the rotting waste, and Chidi wished for a breeze, even if that meant more pieces would escape. He dodged the pools of fluid drying on the sidewalk. A couple of them had fat, white maggots wriggling under the open sun. This always made him a little sick to walk into his restaurant, but the contrast inside settled him.

He carried the goods to the kitchen and stored them, bringing a package from Lagos back to the front of the restaurant along with the key to the candy machine. He emptied, cleaned, dried, and refilled the canisters with TomToms, Trebor Butter Mints, and Fox's Glacier Fruits. These were now all five cents each, because that way, when Ariel bought the candy for someone else's child, their own children would not have food taken out of their mouths. This had been their solution when Chidi had heard his U.S.-born wife a number of times accusing a customer, "What kinda person go and make a child feel bad just for wanting what taste so sweet?"

While he worked, he looked across the street at the house whose windows had been boarded up from when a fire had burst through this past spring semester with RPI students living there. The narrow gaps between the houses made fires leap all too easily from one to another, but this fire had kept to itself. This was probably also partly due to the fact that it was one of those houses with its own driveway and parking, which added space between it and at least the one house next to it on that side. Chidi noticed a roll off dumpster had been delivered this morning and staged to the side of the house on the driveway. He hoped that meant the contract workers, sure to follow today, would come in when Fufu opened for lunch.

He went to Ariel in the kitchen to begin assisting with the day's prep and mentioned it to her. She seemed unimpressed, so he said, "You know it is true that new customers go out and spread the good word. And the farther they come from, the farther the word travels." He rested his hand on her shoulder, authoritatively, and watched her busy hands and felt the workings of her joint. "It only takes one stir of the pot for things to start rising to the surface."

Everyone said that Chidi had a way with words, and he would ask them, "Can a way be made with words?"

In stark contrast, outside of her family and her temper, Ariel usually only spoke in response, when addressed or otherwise requested, since so many people where they now lived struggled to understand her and ridiculed the lazy or improper way she talked. Chidi would have been the last person to encourage her to code-switch in society. He thought her perfect; in his estimation, she could do no wrong, even when it was necessary for him to make serious adjustments for her decisions. Like their coming into the Capital District to raise their children and to be among this society who didn't always want to hear what she had to say. It was enough for him to believe she knew what was best for their family.

Ariel and he began his grandmother and mother's recipes for Ofe Ora, Ofe Onugbu, and Ofe Egusi. They would also make okra soup, and ogbono soup, in case anyone wanted the ogbono mixed into the okra. Fufu offered edikaikong as its last soup option. These were always available on the Fresh Made Within the Hour menu of five-dollar swallow meals. But for half-price, a customer could order a swallow meal from the Yesterday's Soups menu, these leftovers having been made the previous day of business and reheated the next. Chidi and Ariel served whatever still remained of Yesterday's Soups at the end of each day as free dinners to the homeless. For swallows, which were made to order, customers could choose from five—garri, semo, amala, plantain, or pounded yam for the self-indulgent.

And indeed, while Chidi and Ariel raised more and more steam fragrant with stewed meats, fish and crayfish broths, red palm oil, Knorr (only because the supplier had been out of Maggi), boiling greens and seeds and onions, dried pepper, and pounded cocoyam, the contract workers arrived across the way and began filling the dumpster with the guts of the house.

The first customer of the day through the door was a member of their church. He came in, acting surprised to see the Onwuachimba family—Chidi at the counter, and Ariel holding baby

Chizoba and seated with Chinonso and Sabra at the table against the wall, across from the open kitchen area but along the hallway toward the bathrooms.

The customer joked, “What, back already?”

Chidi drew his hands and shoulders up in a shrug. “I do not know what it is, Brother Nelson. Every day we feed them, but every day they return. They just keep getting hungry.” The men smiled and hugged. Mr. Nelson crossed to sit with the family while Chidi ladled some boiling water into the plantain flour for the man’s usual swallow.

Mr. Nelson greeted the children, shaking the fist of Chizoba clenched around his index finger. “Sister Onwuachimba, I got good news. From my doctor.”

“Love it already.”

“Says my diabetes is gone, gone. Told her about all the time I been hauling myself up and down this hill and eating my plantain fufu.” At this, he winked over at Chidi, who was stirring the pot with a wooden spoon. He turned back to Ariel. “It’s a miracle, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, yes,” she answered. “I do say.”

When Chidi had finished rolling and plating the fufu balls and dishing the soup, he carried them over to Mr. Nelson. Chinonso took advantage of his father’s near proximity to show him the aliens in the comic book he was reading. Chidi looked at the page and handed it back to his son.

“It does not make sense to me that Martians would be green on The Red Planet. They would stand out too much,” Chidi said.

Chinonso retaliated, covering his open book with his flat palms. “Well, it’s not like we’re the color of dirt.”

“But yes, we are. Every person on this planet.” Chidi, energized by cooking for his first customer, turned and walked toward the front windows to look for the next. “We are all the color of dirt. *Autochthonous*. From the soil.”

“God bless you,” Chinonso said, which he tended to say when his *nnà* was introducing a new giant of a word to him, suggesting Papa had done nothing more than sneeze. Normally, Chidi did not let his son disregard his words in this way, let alone call for an action from God so lightly and insincerely, especially when it involved his well-being. But this time, he did not hear Chinonso’s staple joke. Instead, his mind was busy interpreting the possibilities for what he had just seen, against the glare of the midday summer sun.

Yes, it was what he had hoped. The crew of contract workers was crossing the street together and coming toward the restaurant. Yes, they seemed to have wrapped up their work at the right time, as if ready to take a lunch break, buttoning up and tucking in shirts and finger-combing their hair under their ball caps. One guy was wiping his ash-smudged face with a handkerchief he had somehow managed to keep pristine white up to that point. They were the only movement out there. All the cars parallel-parked along both sides of the street were shining and abandoned. The house was still and abandoned. The dumpster was silent and abandoned.

But then, he saw what he struggled to tell himself he saw. Over the men’s heads, behind their backs, across the street, from an upstairs window of the house on the opposite side of the dumpster, there arced in soundless flight, through the airspace between the top stories of the buildings, a soft blue swaddle with a fishtail whipping in the current. It was falling, forward. Launched. Into the dumpster, where it was lost to Chidi’s sight, where it must have landed. No one responded. Chidi looked again at the men, the first of whom were now pushing through the front door. He looked at the darkened window from which this sailing object had so swiftly and

lightly been ejected, and next at the top of the dumpster from which nothing emanated, except the sharp edges of burnt building materials. Then, he looked at his wife cradling their baby.

Although he had his regular number of customers all day and his regular duties all evening, part of Chidi never left his position standing in front of that window and never stopped seeing the impossible. Thus, when the rest of him had descended in the dark, snuffed the oil lamp, and stood again where he had earlier that day, it was as though all of him had never left that place or moment. He had waited until very late to come downstairs, until everyone seemed asleep—inside and out, upstairs and down, to the left and right. The street ran smoothly down the hill, where it eddied with another street that ran just as swiftly down another hill until it ran up against the Hudson River, pooled, and diverted. Chidi turned his back on the window and looked at his feet in their sandals. His toes curled and flexed—strong and sure and ready. And pretty hairy, too.

“No one has come to me today with a confession or an explanation,” he said to his feet. “We must go out, you and I, and you must take me. I will have to be the one to say.” He checked the lock on the back door of the building; locked the interior door at the back of the storage room that also opened, along with the back door, to the stairs up to his family; touched his black apron with ochre embroidered *nsibidi* symbols hanging at the kitchen passage; and locked the front door of the restaurant behind himself. He removed his windbreaker, hung it on the door pull handle, and rolled up his sleeves. His feet turned toward the dumpster across the street, as if indicating, *It's a straight shot*. They started out smacking their leather soles against the blacktop of the street, but at the driveway, they bent up on themselves, halving their force, and shuffled up to the edge of the dumpster.

Chidi glanced at the upstairs back window on the opposite side of the dumpster and found it still open. He looked about himself. Continuing to keep watch, he pulled a slim MagLite from his pocket, twisted on the beam, and peered into the front end of the dumpster, where he had not seen the blanketed object land and did not see any evidence of it now. Chidi scanned the upstairs windows of his own house and saw no light or motion. Spot-checking the dumpster contents from the side, he made his way to the back end, directly underneath the window in question. The blood pressure inside his ears rang in the quiet. Barely leaning forward, he saw it immediately and backed up, his stomach and cheeks tightening. His feet sprang forward and launched him into that metal pit.

Not much had landed on it, but Chidi needed to move a few things to uncover and loosen the baby blue shroud. He lifted an edge of the blanket in his disbelief. As if the baby were a doll with malfunctioning sleep or rocker eyes, one grayed eye was open, and one was closed, because a 20 penny nail was coming from the temple, through the eyelid. That eyeball had cried blood. And Chidi called out, at the top of his voice, to the window.

“Vicious viper!” His spit sparked in the moonlight. “Who has done this evil thing? How have you sat all this day seeing what you have done? Were you able to sit calmly with it, because you thought you had done it in safety, from your dark den? Well, your deed came out into the light. I saw it. Now, I warn you of the coming wrath for your unlawfulness.” He said all this and several other things that caused other voices to light up and start calling out. And then, among the clamor, he heard a woman’s voice, maybe two, inside the house, starting to yell, but not at him, not through the window. It sounded like she, or they, were screaming at a man, who was responding with shouts of affirmation. All their voices were retreating into the center of the house, away from the window. So, Chidi climbed out of the dumpster and lit down the driveway.

As he crossed the street, he pleaded with the darkened upstairs windows of his house, and with the moonlight-rimmed clouds stacked against the sky. “Lion of God, take away the sin of the world.”

In the reflection on Fufu’s glass door, Chidi clearly saw himself standing, flipping through the keys on his keyring. But over his head, behind his shoulder, across the street, from the front porch of the house, a shadowy figure that reminded Chidi of a black-necked spitting cobra zigzagged, all hunched and shrouded. It passed through the lawn in front of that house and by those cars parked opposite. Then, it passed between the cars directly behind Chidi on the sidewalk. There, Chidi lost sight of it in the reflection. He could see only himself again in the glass door, shaking out the key he needed. He noticed how the skin on his face and arms, under the bluish glow of the streetlamp, looked purple.

Holding out his key toward the lock, he heard a gunshot. A bullet hole, surrounded by red rings of blood dripping across white rings of light, was suddenly in the door-glass in front of him. Where it had not been a fraction of a second before then. Right through his reflection. Separating his head from his shoulders. On one of his shoulders, a woman danced. If he had the time again to turn and clarify what he was seeing, he would have realized she was actually on the porch of the house, gesturing wildly at a man in a hoodie standing behind him. In such a moment, Chidi would have said something, but there was nothing in the place where his voice had been. When he went down, his mind told him he was ducking in response to the bang, which made him wonder whether the child was dead before or because of the fall.

Moments after the gun flashed orange in the downstairs windows of the Onwuachimba house, the yellow light from the upstairs windows snapped on. The hooded man, poised above

Chidi, dropped his shoulders and slithered off. His female charmer, over on the front porch across the street, dropped back inside the house, out of sight. Ariel, whose family-in-law had given her the Igbo name Chinweike on her wedding day, appeared above the street and looked down immediately at Chidi on the sidewalk. He had managed to smile, having seen her light illuminate the space above him, before his spirit had risen to meet it. But the smile on his face, gazing so contentedly at her as it had so many nights, did little to reassure her. She set out to go to him, but every door was locked. The one through which she could see Chidi a few feet from her, and which had scattered gems of broken tempered glass beneath her feet, and which breathed across her face a cool night breeze through a gaping hole, had a double cylinder deadbolt. She had to think where the spare key was hidden in the kitchen. She might have been asleep. As always, when her mind needed focus, she stopped, looked down, spread her hands, and said, "Your will." Instantly, she would remember what she was doing and what she required.

Once outside, Ariel took Chidi's windbreaker from the door and laid it over his torso, lifting the collar to cover his throat wound. Then, she took his hand, bowed her head, closed her eyes, and began to pray. As she spoke, the neighborhood settled back into a restful calm. The sirens that had set off in the distance ceased their blaring. The backlight behind the clouds faded. The surface of Chidi's windbreaker ruffled, and the ends of her knotted headscarf fluttered. She opened her eyes and lifted her gaze from the hills, heavenward. When she saw, over their crests, out of the clouds, against the sky, a flaming dormouse, undulating with firelight, streaking brilliantly downward behind two fiery horses, whose legs whipped the air into a flurry of currents, she rose and stood far off to the side. In the carriage's wake, the heated currents twisted into a vortex, which drew the clouds into a whirlwind, descending after it. The horses landed between Ariel and Chidi. The blaze pulsed, consuming all that remained of Chidi, including his

blood from the glass and concrete, and left nothing of itself, no trace. The vessel never settled but quickly ascended and entered the whirlwind, which swallowed even itself. And Ariel could not see Chidi anymore.

She checked her upstairs windows, where she, indeed, could not see any of her children's faces. Then, she turned to look at the upstairs windows of the offending house across the street. Her eyes, like the bellies of furnaces, blazed with fire. She stared down the windows, the opposing eyes through which she intended to burn. She grabbed Chidi's keys and flashlight off the pavement and crossed over to pull some plywood out of the front of the dumpster for covering her front door.

Standing under the open window, shining her beam of light up toward it, she said, very quietly, "You done thought we wouldn't talk?"

A small ember of orange flared. A slip of smoke coursed out from under the window rail. "You're just as bad as him," came the response, and then a hand, tapping the cigarette on the window stool, outside.

"Might as well be him," said another. A second woman.

The first voice again, "We'll see who's knocking on whose door next." And with that, the hand flicked the cigarette butt out toward Ariel and shut the sash. The blinds inside zipped down—a few slats bent into a sharp upward angle, half of a couple others completely missing.

Ariel gripped the plywood and murmured, "Your will, Your will, Your will" with every other footstep back to the house, her breath trembling in her chest. She had not slept and would not sleep. The Earth turned over in the sky.

There were so many people to feed, starting with the five, which were enough, but then it felt like thousands. Ariel had to be about the work. Her children pestered her to send the people away to find food elsewhere, so the Onwuachimbas could be left alone to rest and recover.

“Why they gots to go, when you can feed them? What we steady serving, it good for they bodies, they souls, and they wallets. Lot of them depending on us, same as y’all depending on me. Papa been raising you to feed them, and I got to feed you. I know that.”

Sure enough, every day, they continued to have leftovers for Yesterday’s Soups and for those still needing to be fed even after that. The older girls, Nneka and Bitty, helped serve those dining for free, sitting and talking with them while the people ate, like Papa would be doing. Their little sister, Sabra, stood near the front door and shook hands, without squeezing, since children do not know a person is supposed to squeeze as well as shake a hand. She also tried to share “Christ’s peace” with them, but this was about as well-pronounced as her handshake. Most people answered, leaning way down to get their ears near her little pink mouth with her finger in it, “What, honey? What’s that? Something about crying peas?” Her sisters kept sweeping her away with their cupped hands on her bottom, but then Mama would dismiss them instead, when she caught them discouraging Sabra, who was a blessing and not an embarrassment or nuisance. Chinonso had the idea of packing baggies of fried plantain chips—which he got his *nne* to make—with some *Holla*-peñuts—Mama’s jalapeño peanuts already made for sale—for the homeless to take with them so that the time until they would return did not feel so long.

Ariel and her children were waiting for Nne Nne, Chidi’s mother, to arrive from Nigeria before hosting a memorial service. Ariel had told her children that God had already taken Papa to Heaven. The oldest among them knew that this happened at any time to everyone, and that they would see their *nnà* again at their times, but the suddenness and surreptitiousness of the

conveyance while they were sleeping seemed more like a theft than a death to them. They blamed her for not having done enough. They assumed she had not cared enough. They accused her of sleeping. For them to have been asleep was obedience, but for Mama to have been asleep, when Papa needed her, when Papa was dying, that dormancy was apathy or weakness. Either way, it was at-fault and suspect. And her ability to work now, under constant pressure, so quietly and confidently and competently, was a sure sign of disinterest. They would not let the matter rest.

“Mourning ain’t no sabbath,” Ariel said to Nneka, Bitty, and Chinonso, who were watching her install the replacement door to Fufu on a Sunday afternoon, the only day the restaurant was closed in a week. The new glass door had arrived before Nne Nne, for which Ariel was grateful. She stopped and lifted her browline, shifting her attention from aligning a door to addressing her children through the glass of that door, where she could see them on the other side in a rectangle of gray light. The skin along her brow bone lightened. “Loss don’t excuse you from what needs done. Y’all think I can’t keep working on account of I got grief? God done got the same taste of sadness, same kind we got. Every day, the Spirit grieve. But do God delay? The one time God rested, everything was good, and wasn’t nothing in the world wrong. Since then? Well. People ain’t exactly provided another opportunity.” The children’s mouths were hanging as low as their shoulders. Ariel tisked at them. “Rouse and raise! Y’all the ones need woke up. Let’s get back to it, now. Who gonna hand me that rubber mallet? I finna show you what a life of love look like.”

Mamá Chinasa finally stepped onto the gleaming expanse of white tiles on the baggage claim floor of Albany International Airport. The teal in the fabrics of her double wrapper

reflected on the shiny floor around her open-toe heels. Her peach *ichafu* opened like a flower around her head. She dripped with bangles, rings, heavy earrings, and bead necklaces, and a brooch nested in the folds in her head scarf. Underneath all this, the elderly woman was a withered stalk, but the square angles of her chin and her jawline were set firmly above the square neckline of her white-lace simple blouse. Ariel came up to her, carrying baby Chizoba. The other four children followed.

“*Kèdú*, Chinweike?” said Chinasa to Ariel.

“*Odinma.*”

Chinasa squeezed the baby’s feet and bent his knees. “*Ọdụdụ nwa.*”

Each of the children behind Ariel, in line, dipped their knees and replied with “Nne Nne Anyi” when Chinasa greeted them, from oldest to youngest, “*Àdá. Ulu nwa. Ókpára. Nwannem nwan yi ntà.* Sabra, you have changed the most in the short while since I have seen you. I thought that it would be Chizoba, but it is certainly you. You are the one most struck in the face by the loss of your dear *nnà*. It has made you beautiful, radiant. I see *Shekinah* there now, like your *nne*. Your father always said she was from Heaven above.” Chinasa had just visited in the spring to meet Chizoba and to participate in the annual feast in honor of the Onwuachimba house in Troy. At that time, while Chidi and Ariel danced in their family kitchen on the second floor, Chinasa had wandered around the two residential stories, unfolding and tossing cash bills at the walls and furniture. The children followed her, singing and collecting the money from wherever it landed.

In that same family kitchen now, Chinasa removed her top wrapper and sat at the table. Ariel brought a glass of water to her and stood, leaning against the sink, as her mother-in-law took her first dredge. Chinasa set the glass a little too far from herself and appeared to be overburdened to reach for it again on her own. Ariel, waiting for this, came forward to hand the

glass to her. Then, when her mother-in-law set it back down once more on the table, Ariel filled it again before joining Chinasa at the table. The two women sat in silence, and Chinasa scanned the kitchen and the living room beyond. What she did not see drove her forward to rest her elbows on the table and her head in her hands. She seemed more relaxed for a moment. But then, her mouth tightened, and she began to cry. The wrinkles around her lips smoothed out, as they stretched over her teeth. She covered her mouth with her hands, until she could take a breath without wheezing.

“I cannot see why I am here, Chinweike. How are we to have the wake? The first funeral?”

Ariel leaned forward, put her head near Chinasa’s, and grasped a bangled wrist. She was now crying as well. “I couldn’t of waited anyways, Ma,” she whispered, “to bury him. You ain’t seen him.”

Chinasa put her hand over Ariel’s, squeezed it, and then sat back. She spied the children peeking at them from the top of the stairs and took a deep, quivering sigh. “The first time I saw you, Chinweike, my heart leapt inside me like a gazelle. I knew you would raise up a family with my son. But it was hard that he went out so far to do that. He was always going out, beyond the village, and he found someone who has the same way.”

Ariel beckoned the children, and they came down the stairs. Nneka came to sit in Ariel’s lap and had brought her a tissue, which Ariel surrendered to Chinasa while she smeared her own tears across her cheeks. “Chidi and I did conversate. That night, no different. About choices. I wanted you to see how things was for me and for the children. You know they your children, just as much as they mines and Chidi’s?” Chinasa nodded and smiled at Nneka, who turned to curl more tightly against her mother’s body. Ariel lifted Nneka’s chin. “Nneka, you know your *nne*

nne, right? You been seeing her your whole life, and she love you.” Nneka looked at Chinasa to check before she nodded. “I want you, Ma, to be they mother, when something be done happened to me.” Nneka shook her head at her mother. “Don’t you ‘no’ me, child. You don’t know. You think you know. But you don’t know.”

Nneka grasped Ariel’s hand. “Mama, don’t go with Papa. Stay here with me. Don’t you want to? Don’t you love me?”

Ariel raised Nneka’s hand to her cheek and pressed it there, flat along her cheekbone. “We go where we called, Nneka. That way, we ain’t got to fear. We know we right where we supposed to be at. Fear stall you out, quicker than grief. Just ask your *nne nne* how glad she is, from how Papa done passed, that we able to move right into the second funeral. Huh?” Chinasa’s gaze lifted from her grandchild’s face, who had been addressed, to her daughter-in-law’s face, who was now addressing her. “Where your spirit at, Ma?”

Chinasa’s answer settled into a stare under low-lying lids. “You know you do not need to question my faith. I am only asking you for the practical. For the world of bodies. Where we are, and where we are missing one very precious body among us. Can you meet me there?”

“I can do whatever you ask.”

“*Will* you, then?”

“I ain’t trying to be cruel. I ain’t trying to deny nobody no good thing. I always be getting my family through. But y’all don’t make it easy, and don’t nobody else neither.”

Mamá Chinasa decided on a memorial service in the Onwuachimba home but that she would leave immediately afterward, arguing that she had not been invited to be part of this family today but rather part of this family tomorrow, including having been denied the right to

decide how Chidi would be laid to rest. Ariel notified the church and the community of the occasion. She assured Pastor Thomas that he did not need to serve any official capacity, but only to come and help remember Chidi. He understood as soon as he heard that Chidi's mother had come from Nigeria to lead the celebration of Chidi's passage into the spirit-world.

All three stories of the house filled with people. The front sidewalk, side driveway, and rear parking lot filled. The crowd continued spreading up the sidewalk and into the neighborhood park, where they settled here and there across the lawn and hillocks to speak of what each person knew of Chidi. Chinasa commenced with burying a few precious items of Chidi's in the back plot. She had chosen and Ariel had approved his apron, which Chinasa had given to him upon his opening of Fufu; his oil lamp, which was the sole item Chidi had taken from his village; his sandals, which bore physical impressions of his body. Pastor Thomas left shortly after Chinasa had completed this task, stopping on the way to tell her what a privilege it was to have seen her again and to assure Ariel her church-family was closer than they would feel, if she would just reach out to them whenever she needed. Like her mother before her, Ariel pretended to snatch that resonating sentiment out of the air with her hand and to store it away in her heart, locking it there with a key. She would remember, and Pastor blessed her.

Ariel ascended to her topmost windows, looked over all the people, and began to work from there, down through all of them, thanking each of them for being there to share of what was left to them of Chidi. It took hours, and she became concerned that she would not get to speak to everyone. But still, they lingered. What was supposed to be a short afternoon ceremony passed well into evening. Finally, her children came to find her, tug her sleeves, and complain of hunger. The Onwuachimba family had not intended to provide, nor could they have afforded to provide, a food reception for all these people.

“Mama, they’re probably hungry, too,” Bitty said. “Send them away, so everyone can get something to eat.”

Ariel put her hand on her daughter’s braids, whose beads clapped when Bitty shook off her grip. “They can eat anytime, Bitty,” Ariel said. “This my only opportunity to talk to them. Sometimes, stomachs gots to wait.”

“Mine can’t wait. It’s talking louder than all these people put together. You’re gonna starve us to death, Mama.” Bitty had dug in her heels and was pulling Ariel’s arm in the direction of the Onwuachimba house.

“Fine, then. But we ain’t never sent nobody away to eat. We always be feeding this many. You go ahead and feed them all now.” The people with whom Ariel had been standing and talking smiled at her and chuckled, but then, they looked back at the child with concern on their faces that her mother was quite serious.

“Mama! Where would I go? What would I do? You’re the one who feeds them. You’re the one who feeds us. You’re supposed to provide for us. It’s the law!” Bitty was akimbo at this point, with all her energy concentrated into a clench between her eyebrows.

“Oh, it be the *law*,” Ariel said, hooking her arm through the crook of one of Bitty’s elbows and excusing herself from the group with, “We gots to fulfill the *law*.”

Ariel and her older children made their way to Fufu’s counter. Ariel paused by Chinasa, seated at the family’s usual table nearby with Sabra and baby Chizoba. She murmured to her mother-in-law that they would now share the kola nuts and palm wine that she had ordered for Chinasa’s visit and that she knew Chinasa longed to provide for everyone at the ceremony. Chinasa’s face blossomed so quickly into sudden joy as she looked up at Ariel that two tears flowed from the outside corners of her eyes and wet the edges of her purple *ichafu*.

Ariel took the kola nuts from the storage pantry and the palm wine from the refrigerator, along with trays and cups. She poured the kola nuts onto a tray and carried it over to Chinasa, who rose and touched the tray with her right hand. Then, Ariel returned to the counter, lifted the tray above her head, and gave thanks to God for the food and drink and for those who hungered and thirsted, that they may feel satisfaction. She filled two other trays with kola nuts and gave them to Bitty and Chinonso to distribute among the people; every time they returned, she filled their trays again. As for the bottle of palm wine, she took it to fill as many cups as would fit on two more trays and sent Chinasa and Nneka to distribute those; every time they returned with empty trays, she had more cups for them to take. Only when everyone there was satisfied, with one hand full of kola nuts and one hand holding a cup, did she let her children take from the leftover nuts. She also let them have a sip of her palm wine, if they wanted. Nneka seemed the most determined to pretend she liked it; Bitty made a worse show than beforehand of her mother trying to kill her; Chinonso merely grinned scandalously as it sat in his mouth; Sabra grimaced at the smell, turned her face, and refused to come any closer to tasting it. Chinasa held Chizoba, pointed out his siblings' silly behavior, and bounced him while laughing. She made her promise to Ariel about the children but still went to finish packing.

That night, she would take off from the edge of the Atlantic, fly across its breadth through the night, fighting the next day to stay awake for a glimpse of the Mediterranean, only to land at the edge of the Atlantic once more. Then, her journey to get home would really begin.

When the glare on the taxi cab windows had effaced Chinasa waving at them all, and when Ariel told her children to get ready for bed and to climb into Papa's and her bed, and when she went about encouraging the people to let go of that day, then they began to disperse. The

house emptied out into the street and over the brows of the hills in all directions, each person bearing Chidi away. He had always preceded her.

Ariel watched them dissipate and disappear. She locked Fufu's doors and turned off all the lights, hearing all the clicks so distinct and near. The late summer sun stretched well into the space. In the place where the oil lamp used to stand and flicker was Ariel with her head bowed and her arms locked against the counter. She could unbury that light, return it to its place. But she would not. Her shoulders pulsed. She wept. Wordless groans. In a moment, she was spent and collapsed on her elbows, burying her face. Her warm breath wet the cool metal countertop. She stood, smeared away the condensation, and began to clean the place and have words with God. Finally, the sunlight left her, and she passed to the front windows to post a notice that the restaurant would be closed the next day.

From there, she looked at the open, dark upstairs window across the street, which still glowered at her. The night of Chidi's transport, she called the police anonymously. The baby was removed from the dumpster before the dumpster was removed from the next-door property. The police had been inquiring since then. And the person Ariel assumed was the mother had been removed from the house, but only long enough to make a statement. For no one, not even Chidi, could have connected the baby's presence in the dumpster to its mother. The mother displayed both grief over learning her child was dead, and relief that it had been found. She, too, had called the police to report her baby missing shortly after Ariel had addressed the figures in the window. Ariel knew perfectly well that her testimony made her breath every bit as much of a threat as Chidi's had been. She also knew that her neighbors would have realized by now why she had not come forward to others as a witness, or reported the circumstances surrounding Chidi's death.

She was trying to extend the last days she had to prepare her children. While everything else was striving to be settled, she continued rising, markedly erect. She knew the strike would come now.

Ariel was deeply exhausted, so that her eyes felt like they had hardened in their sockets. All she wanted was to surround herself with her children. She looked up from the store windows at those few, old-faithful stars visible even from a place like the Capital District. She shut her eyes. The stars were blanketed. The heavens opened. The rain descended. In Troy, this often meant, like now, that the sky took on the tinge of soft orange artificial cheese. Once more, she glanced across the street and nodded at the window. Then, she waded into the darkness of the restaurant; floated down the hallway and through the back storage room; eddied in the foyer for the back stairs. Her fingertips ran along the smooth plaster of the stairwell. She forded the kitchen and grasped the next banister. Here, she removed her shoes. Along these stairs, the storm's flashes of light began to catch her face, then chest, stomach, thighs, and finally feet.

Ariel looked into her bedroom at her children huddled on the bed. Blue light quivered along the walls and floor, and against their cheeks and foreheads. They were caught in restless, tossing sleep, like nets about them. The oldest was rocking the baby. Ariel thought of all that was against them. Nneka held out an arm to her; Ariel grasped it and climbed into the bed, stepping over little blue bodies. She seated herself at the helm with her back against the headboard, wrapping her legs around Nneka and Chizoba and between the two of them and the other three circled around them. As with wide wings, she stretched Chizoba's baby blanket from the rocker around her shoulders and Nneka's and pulled Nneka back against her. For a long time, Ariel breathed deep the warm scent of her eldest's scalp, the roots of the hair of a loved one. She thought of the lamp buried now in the back plot of grass, taking on the wet smell of earth, laying it over the oily smell still upon it. When Nneka began putting all her weight into Ariel, and

Chizoba was released to nestle between Nneka's thighs, then Ariel whispered, "Jacob got the mercy of wrestling an angel. I afraid I stay contending with demons."

It was Bitty who slapped her mother out of her deep sleep, after Sabra had been wailing and grabbing her ankle, Chinonso had been coughing and patting her hand, and Nneka had been calling her name and shaking her shoulder. Ariel woke to Bitty's tight, alert face furious at her relaxed, sleeping face. The diffuse blue light was now brilliant blue flame, rippling over the surfaces around them, flooding the room, sending up mists of smoke in the earliest hours of the morning. The bed jiggled beneath her with the panic of her children, who had turned their backs on the fire and were staring down at her.

"Mama!" Bitty screeched, squeezing the skin of her mother's jowls in her fists and under her sharp curves of fingernail. "Get up. We're gonna die. You don't even care about that."

Ariel grasped her daughter's wrists and stood, Bitty rising above the bed and releasing her grip on her mother's face. Ariel placed her back on the bed among her siblings. The room roiled. The children flailed. Far below them, through the window, the swollen Hudson hurtled between its banks. Ariel put out her hands and sounded her rebuke. The windows burst in the bedroom. Beneath them, they could hear the windows burst in the living room. And the rain raged into the house. Instantly, the smoke and fire subsided. Ariel dropped her hands, gasping, and her children gaped at her in awe. They clutched each other and tried to discern why they were still so afraid. Not one hair nor one stitch among them was singed or even traced with the smell of smoke.

The Onwuachimba household had woken the neighborhood in the night for the second time that summer. Ariel watched the whirling lights wind up the hill, each set turning in tighter

and converging upon one another as they drew closer. This time, she let them come. The fire fighters and police officers made neat work of the scene, details of which indicated someone had broken into the back of the building, thereby gaining access to the domicile, and tossed a fire bomb into the first residential floor, which had spread fire quickly through the living room and the bedroom above it. The fire had not proven too difficult for the occupants to contain and extinguish with water.

After asking Ariel for potential leads on the arsonist, the police crossed the street to question the occupants of the upstairs apartment. The people there had not expected their victims to survive, or to call the police immediately after the fire was set. They still had bomb-making materials all over their dining table, kitchen counter, clothing, and hands when the police arrived. When asked why she had suspected these neighbors, Ariel assumed their motive had been fear over her seeing what had happened with their baby, but really, she had only received hearsay in the restaurant. The ambulance EMTs, who had heard about that case, mentioned that the information she provided would explain the bruising reported along the side of the child's body, which suggested a much greater drop or force than what would have occurred from just depositing the baby in the dumpster.

Ariel looked at each individual being arrested and making the arrests, as they snaked out of the house, down the porch stairs, along the walkway, and into the squad cars. The baby's mother was not removed, and the next morning, the upstairs window across the street remained vigilantly open and watchful. Ariel knew hatred smoldered in wait. Fire passes through all barriers. Its was the work of consumption.

From the front of the Onwuachimba house, one could not tell anything was amiss. At the proper time, Fufu opened and served the community, as always. The windows of the two

residential stories sparkled against the sun. Only the few people who drove to patron Fufu and parked in the back could see the men boarding up the rear windows and doorway, and the vertical black scars along the siding. Most of the customers, though, parked on the street or arrived as foot traffic and remained ignorant of or unconcerned with what had happened.

Pastor Thomas pulled into a parking place and waved up at the men from church, who stopped their hammering and drilling to yell down to him that he would have to walk around to the front of the building. He thumbed-up his understanding. Not that he ever questioned the directions he received whenever Sister Onwuachimba called. When he came through Fufu's front door, Ariel was in the kitchen, and some of the women of the church were helping her there, and also by sitting with her five children at the usual table reserved for the family. The children were having a difficult time staying seated, as they kept needing all four limbs to describe what they were relaying to the women. Chinonso finally stood right up in his chair.

What was really missing was inside the restaurant, in the kitchen, behind the counter, among the tables, near the front door. A voice, calling out. A man, and his way with words. A partner who could prepare you for the other one, the one who was always coming up right behind him, her intentions just as full, just as sure of themselves.

Ariel strode around the counter and came forward, wiping her hands on a herringbone towel, preparing to halt one task and start another. When he took her hand—swollen with warmth and dampness and heartthrob, he held it a moment in both of his and searched her eyes for as long as he could bear. She released him. They sat where they were.

“Sister, the trauma of your family recently. Anyone else and, well. It can make people feel estranged. Distanced.”

“Forsaken?”

He snorted, and when snot bubbled out of his nose, he apologized and admitted he was tearing up. He cupped his hand over his face, and she pulled a couple napkins out of the tabletop dispenser for him. She looked over her shoulder at her children, whose voices were swift and loud as they talked over each other.

Looking over at them, too, he said through blows into paper, “I wasn’t sure how they’d be this morning.” His forehead furrowed into dark creases. *Autochthonous*, Chidi had been teaching them that day. The concern on this man’s face reminded her.

He laughed and worked the wadded tissue into his trouser pocket by extending that leg out from under the table. “They’re really bragging on your super-heroics, huh? You certainly made believers out of them. And Chidi’s service, after I left. Heard some of that talk, too.” He ducked his head, as he was wont to do around her. They were both still a moment, letting the air between them settle. Each of their chins lifted the slightest bit as they drew in deep breaths. He looked at his lap and started nodding. He swallowed hard and tugged on his silk tie, saying, “The children are east-and-west, indeed, from their recent complaints about how dependable and invested you seem to them. I’m serious: sounds like they’re starting to see you for who you are.”

“Lot to learn about truth. It take a while before you sit comfortable with it. Truth harder to tell. Harder to believe. And people rather be in debt than set free.”

“There you go, letting me assume that I know what you mean.” He flexed one forearm by bending down his fist from the wrist—from its crisp, rolled-up, white sleeve. Then, he revolved his fist at the wrist, once, and shook looseness into his arm, twisting his metal wristwatch. “I can’t say I’m ever really sure of what’s going on with you, or what I should be doing for you. And without Chidi—Well, maybe we’re all gonna get a more direct line of sight.” Sweating as though two-thirds into a sermon, he bent forward and leaned his elbows on his knees, touching

his fingertips of his two hands together. He squinted, focusing hard on her face in a way that suggested he did not actually want to see it.

“I’m an open book,” she shrugged. “All day, every day, restoration. Feeding hungry people.”

He sat up and spread his hands. “Yes, but for how much longer? I’m just afraid there’s so much *more*.”

“One quantity ain’t got nothing to do with the other. Don’t speed nothing up by trying to do greater sooner. Gotta give people the time they need. Some studying to be the good person. Some studying to be the great person. And some ain’t never gonna arrive at no kind of passion.”

Pastor Thomas stood and chuckled. “Why do I always have to remind you that I am the pastor here?”

Ariel laughed as well. “Should be as obvious to me as the Spirit’s work in the world to you.” She stood and reached into her pocket to hand him a nickel. She indicated the candy machines and squeezed the side of his hand. “Thank you for coming to me. You a comfort.”

“Of course. Anything I can do for you. Bid me come anytime.”

As she passed her children, she told them that they should not talk of this anymore, and they were able to do as she asked for several minutes.

As long as the Onwuachimba children had their *nne*, they never again doubted she was about their business, even when nervous about what good she would do. They believed her to be aware, present, powerful, and trustworthy. That was their need with their father gone from them, and it prepared them for what they would need when their mother, too, would wake. Her favorite stories to them became those with which she described the paradise of rising.

Les Cousines Souris

The second night after Savannah's college graduation, her stepmother's bawling voice came into Savannah's mind, fogging out her dream, like vapors rushing over dark streets. Daddy and Sophie were upstairs in the converted attic that served as the master suite. Savannah turned her legs out of bed and sat straight. She tried to interpret the words, but wooden beams and chalky drywall distorted them. So, she tiptoed into the hallway, stretching for the opposing wall and running her hand along it until she was near the door at the foot of their stairs. Sophie shrieked. Savannah froze—her ears perked—but then grabbed the knob and opened their bedroom door.

She saw Daddy standing at the top of the stairs, his back to her. He was naked. He had square, flat buttocks, and she was shocked to see how pink they were. A strong man like that. Sophie was on her knees before him, groping his thighs—her face against his pelvis, but looking up at his face. Tears streamed down the outer edge of her cheek. Her hair, bedraggled; her eyes, wild. She implored him, "Love me enough to want me. They get that much. Why can't I? Why can't you?" Daddy told Sophie that she only hurt herself. Sophie buried her forehead against his hip bone and sobbed. Savannah squeezed her fists tight as she scurried back to her room. She might not have remembered to shut their door. She was not going back to check. They could afford to care more that somebody else was in the house.

She sat cross-legged on her bed and gnawed the corner of her pillowcase, sucking her saliva out of the fabric every now and then, pausing each time Sophie wailed—her second mother, whom Daddy had taken into his house after her first mother went, crazy. For girls needed a mother and he needed his girls. Yet, for Daddy, Sophie proved to be as limited between the sheets as granite statuary, reportedly assuming only one position. Daddy called it “missionary” or “preacher-at-the-pulpit,” which did seem to Savannah to correspond with the conversive quality of a woman’s love. Sophie had never, before this moment, reminded Savannah of Mama. Mama’s last understandable sentiment, expressed in an effort to explain to Savannah what was happening to her, was that it was hard knowing you were replaceable, but it was impossible knowing you were replaced. Sophie had never before scared Savannah in that way, in the way Savannah’s cousin Jorjanna had also done once, in coming so near the wrath that puts an end to the glad celebration of brides and grooms, in approaching the most fearsome verse in Scripture—that He can become unwilling to forgive. Sophie’s words had never voiced the song in Savannah’s own heart. From where she sat, Savannah could now hear every word.

Daddy was still in his place, above, with a diminishing whomever. Savannah was still in her place, below. Since Jorjanna had abandoned them two years ago, upon graduating high school, it really was just Daddy and Savannah. Now, Savannah was celebrating her own graduation, from Brenau University. Her senior year, she had pondered “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child,” until the last few weeks, when she thought, *I can’t be a grown woman chasing this man around. I’m not on that side of him, like every other woman. The before-side. I’m on the after-side of him. I’m already in permanent relations with him. I should be secure.* She could not see why she was running so hard, or why, if

she slowed up at all, she fell behind so fast. Obviously, he did not need her, but what did it mean, then, that he still wanted her?

She rocked and murmured, “ ‘Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!’ ” If we are remembered, then we have been known. If we receive compassion, then we can be preserved. Savannah, alone on the second story of Daddy’s house, crawled back under her covers. She lay on her stomach, with her arms crossed on her pillow, her chin resting on the crux, and her gaze fixed on the wall, which had no cousin’s sleepy head on the other side. For twelve years of nights, the two girls had kept their emptied water glasses on their bedside tables, just in case either of them heard the mousiest knock on the wall. A glass rested there now, within Savannah’s reach, but it would not cup Jorjanna’s voice or reverberate it against Savannah’s ear. The moon would rise and set on its curved side. Savannah fell asleep with her fingertips against the wall—medium yellow, with Jorjanna’s blue-gray on the reverse. Of course, Jorjanna’s had been whitewashed in her absence and no longer absorbed the shadows as well. Savannah began dreaming again of many things.

“You’re just plain greedy,” Savannah said to Daddy at breakfast, wedging the last triangle-bite of her Belgian waffle into her mouth. She chewed with her mouth open, partly because she packed her cheeks so full. But then, she would hold her fingers in front of her full mouth to speak.

“I think you’ve got us confused,” he said. “I already provide you with the best possible home, and you want me to line a second nest for you? That’s picking a man’s pocket.”

“Now, Daddy, the mouse that has but one hole is quickly taken.” Savannah carried her plate to the sink to soak the maple syrup whorls on her plate, and she kept the water running over her sticky fork. All this made him raise his voice.

“Quoting proverbs does not make you rational. Show some enlightenment.”

“You’re the one being irrational. You let Jorjanna move out after high school.”

“ ‘Let’ her? You’re gonna try to get away with that? Jorjanna got herself a job, and Jorjanna bought herself a house. There wasn’t even a conversation to be had.”

Sophie interjected that she was glad to see that someone around there was capable of changing their mind about certain things. She said this while brushing the crumbs from around her plate into her hand. Daddy flicked a glance at her but returned his attention to Savannah. He set down his knife and fork.

“Come here and get this plate, young woman. You’ve ruined my appetite.”

When Savannah had finished the dishes, she stole upstairs to call Jorjanna at work, to tell her the good news. “Hey, bumpkin,” Savannah said. Jorjanna did not normally allow this, but she worked a part-time admin job at their church and would be looking around her right now to consider her options for response. Savannah smiled into the receiver, getting away with it on her end of the line. Jorjanna scrambled, but Savannah went on without her. “I’m getting what you’ve got, only better. That’s right; I’m gonna be free, free, free. And happy—everything just as I want it. I’m gonna have my own place.”

“You’re abandoning ship?”

“Well, I’m getting another spread. With all the trimmings.”

“What’s happened? Did something happen? Do you need somewhere to hide out?”

“Did you just say ‘hide out’? Jorjanna. My dear. You’re delicious. But I’m not in danger; I’m delighted. Don’t be frightened; be pleased. Let’s at least be sophisticated and refer to it as a ‘hideaway.’ ”

“It’s just that this can’t be. I mean, how’s your father? What’s he say?”

“It doesn’t matter. It ain’t like he’s God.”

“How can you tell?”

Savannah spluttered when she laughed and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Jorjanna whispered, “Only, no one’s ever informed him of that, and he ain’t found out yet.”

“Well, those who need to know know.”

Daddy’s voice electrified the line. “Hey, my girls. It’s only me; it’s only the old man. Short, fat, and balding.” He chuckled at that.

Savannah exclaimed, “Daddy!” In her mind, she had already moved to the place where he could not appear suddenly and address the two of them together.

He grunted in his laugh, and Savannah knew he was rising from underneath his paunch, which lay on his lap like a warm pussycat. She heard the television crescendo in the background. He must be leaving the family room and turning up the volume for Sophie, to drown out the other sounds in the house. Daddy remarked to Sophie that he hoped she would be able to hear it all right with everybody else in the house gabbing on the telephone. Then, he excused himself, so he would not disturb her further.

“Aunt Sophie there?” Jorjanna asked.

“Yes, honey, yes. Sophie’s here. She’s right here.” Savannah detected the faint pinching sound of Daddy kissing Sophie’s head as he walked past her. The girls stayed silent. “She’s fine.

Fine. Just fine. I'm fine, yes." He would be in the foyer by now. "We're just...here... We're here... We're fine." His breath betrayed his climbing the stairs. "We're just here watching the television, yes. An old flick on TCM...Cary Grant and...and..." The girls continued to wait. Soon, he would be in a safe place to begin the real conversation. "Okay," he would say in a lowered voice; whatever followed depended on what stage he had developed with the woman of the hour.

The conversations started in the stars and, as the weeks passed, tumbled to dirt. He might gush about how happy he was, how great the new woman was, how much fun he was having, how this one looked and was in bed, how demanding women got, how demanding this one was getting, how he needed to enforce the rules, how he could devise an exit strategy, how he could stop the harassment, how he could hide it from Sophie and all the others, how it was never what he thought it would be, how their emotions always got involved, or how he would never, never admit it even when accused with evidence. For that was just hurtful, and there was never a reason to be hurtful.

Often, he would cry, in deep-gut convulsions like a dog vomiting. He would lean his head forward to be held. But as soon as one of them touched him, he sucked his sobs back in and wandered off to an urgent matter he just recalled. They were left with worrying, emptied hands. They had done nothing for him. Yet, like a dog returning to his vomit, Daddy seemed to hold fast to his faith in the hope that love would save him. And these two young ladies propitiated for peace, reconciliation, acceptance.

Savannah heard his padding down the hallway, and he raised his eyebrows as he crossed her threshold, the wireless receiver held to his ear. He sat in the white wicker fan chair next to her bed. She lay covered with a patchwork quilt hand-pieced by his grandmother, which Sophie

kept so neat. She picked at the kink that curved a ninety-degree bend in the coiled cord of her princess phone. She did not use to have to do this without Jorjanna in the room.

“Okay,” he said.

“Well, we can’t wait to hear her name,” Jorjanna said. Savannah wondered whether Jorjanna would have their notebook on her. She could hear Jorjanna clutching at pens, followed by the click of a ballpoint. Jorjanna would be poised.

The girls drilled each other regularly—sometimes because laughing about it made it more manageable and sometimes as a competition with each other. They might forget a name, though how many more names for women could possibly exist? Or an age, for it could really be anything. Or a hair color, but this had proven to be a worthless mnemonic device. Or whether that was the one from there or from then or was new altogether. Daddy told his lady-friends that they had to pass The S–J Test. Savannah and Jorjanna imagined a large and expanding population considered them harsh critics. Savannah doubted that just one woman’s opinion, like hers, would make any difference, that it could work when only one was involved.

“Her name’s Claire,” he said. “She’s really very special.” But he said that about his women, just as he said it about his girls. He reassured everyone that everyone would like everyone else, and both sides were sure to nod their chins and agree they would. This did not mean he wanted anyone to take his sentiments so personally, certainly not to the point of relying on them. Such faithfulness was reserved for a select few ladies from his youth, with whom he had never gotten as far. Even their memories, though, he cycled through their turns. These were the women he should have married, with whom he should have had children. For unrequited love is the only kind that lasts. These ladies Savannah and Jorjanna would never meet.

Before he could go further, Savannah nestled back into her pillows, pinched ridges in the quilt across her thighs, and said into her receiver, “Don’t think we’re gonna be meeting her this weekend. It’s gonna have to wait till next, because this weekend, I’m moving.” The insides of her throat hardened when she peered up to see Daddy looking at her, his jaw ridge tight. *What?*, she mouthed. She plucked the nail file from off her bedside table and began sculpting a nail but could not manage to move on to another nail, no matter how many times she told herself to do so inside her mind. When she peeked again, Daddy had looked away—the other and worse punishment in life for another’s displeasure. He was contemplative a moment, and then, he stood. He snapped his phone receiver off right in front of her face. She took the phone from him and pushed his hand away from her. She mouthed, *Shut the door, please*. The cloth clung to his buttocks.

“Oh, JoJo, you don’t even know. I could just strangle someone; I swear.”

And indeed, that Saturday, the three ladies moved Savannah’s bedroom out of Daddy’s house along Riverside Drive, into the rental truck, and, then, into a two-story townhouse sitting on its own buried two-car garage. Daddy sat in his wing-back chair in the center of his family room, reiterating what he had grumbled—that this was a mistake—since her declaration of departure. He acted more at a loss this time than when Jorjanna moved out. Might as well be dead-in-the-ground, that they should forsake him. He could not conceive how any could slip out of his hand. And Savannah. Bone from his bone, flesh from his flesh.

But Sophie encouraged Savannah, who now looked out at her from under a worried pair of well-groomed eyebrows at the threshold of her new home. Sophie squeezed Savannah’s hands and declared this good. Then, the woman nudged the girl back a bit and shut the door, Savannah

half-waving from her hip, one of her feet standing on the other, her pony-tail band falling loose. Sophie and Jorjanna's housewarming gift bopped once on its brass hook against the steel door. A wreath handmade from Savannah's mortarboard cap, tassel, flowers from Daddy, and strips of her graduation gown braided with her stole. It had turned out too black for both of their likings, but it would have to do. They wanted to be pleased for Savannah, not frightened.

They crossed to the rental truck, glittering on the blacktop. Jorjanna clicked her seat belt and examined a hang-nail before realizing Sophie had not started the ignition. Instead, Sophie was gazing through the tinted blue strip at the top of the windshield. Two streaks of foundation-tinged sweat coursed over the deep rose powder circled into her cheeks. Jorjanna followed the line of Sophie's sight and could see Savannah's soft-pink-and-blond, unblinking profile in the middle of the living room, slit between the modern blinds. Jorjanna had given Savannah a Victorian cameo brooch with those same hues for her graduation gift. Savannah had sighed for years over those graven images of loveliness. The truck started and turned back into the world. The sun raised a glare on every surface on the way back to Daddy's house. The two ladies in the vehicle could not help the sour-pickle scowls on their own profiles.

Immediately after church the next day, Daddy Souris led Jorjanna by the elbow through the 'chicken-door' on the opposite side of the sanctuary from where the line of congregants waited to greet the pastor and shake his hand. Daddy refused, when Jorjanna asked if she could sit in the back seat. Savannah or Sophie always served in the front-seat position at Daddy Souris's right. Jorjanna had never been asked to take that cup, to enter the holy of holies. One Sunday school teacher long ago said the Levites tied a rope around the attending priest's waist to drag out his body when he made a mistake. She looked over her shoulder out the car window as

the line lengthened on their approach to Savannah's offensive home, and she tasted salt on her lip.

Upon arrival, Jorjanna was surprised to see Savannah was not still staring at the inside of the front door. As soon as the car mostly stopped, she popped the car door handle.

"Don't toy with her," Daddy Souris said, shifting the car into park. "Give her Hell now, so she doesn't have to face It later. *That's* compassion."

Jorjanna leapt forward when Savannah answered the doorbell, squeezed her around the waist, and hid her face in her neck. She shivered. Savannah locked a grin over Jorjanna's head and waved at Daddy. She led Jorjanna into the kitchen to entice her with a nibble.

"I've done great. You'll admire this," Savannah said, sitting on the kitchen counter and tallying accomplishments on the pink pads of her fingers. "I got my clothes and the bathroom done last night, and this morning, Daddy's betting wad from his golf bag escorted me to the store for kitchen necessities. I even made sweet tea and pink lemonade for Arnold Palmers and played my music while I worked."

Jorjanna did nod and look about her in an effort to notice and appreciate the cushy surroundings, but her gaze kept landing on the front windows.

"Was Daddy awful about me not being in church?" Savannah asked.

"I think it was the expected shock of it." The girls laughed. Jorjanna sniffed. "The choir started singing—you know, for everyone to come on inside and take their seats. He was using the back of his pew to turn himself all around, looking this way and that. Said—right out loud—that he was surprised, but Sophie said that God wasn't, so he shouldn't be either. Whoo, Daddy Souris sure gave her a look, and she hopped up to put on a robe and join the choir. I think it was probably that or go wait in the car." The girls laughed again.

Savannah reached over and wound the coiled cord of the phone—now proudly mounted on the wall—around her forefinger. When she released it, a white swirl twisted around a hot pink core. Blood was a mystery: such concentrated heat in its presence, such cool purity in its absence.

“And then,” Jorjanna said, “when we’d all greeted each other, and you were still nowhere to be seen, and Pastor was waving us down to sit?”

“Yeah?”

“Daddy Souris started pointing at Sophie up in the choir loft and whispering, so as everybody could hear, about how he told her so. Sophie was waving him down, too, to sit, so I pulled on his jacket hem a little, but he pointed at me then and was all saying how he knew this was gonna happen, and then about me knowing something, too.”

Savannah jumped down from the counter, crossed over to a front window, folded her arms, and looked at the parked car. “Don’t give it another thought. He obviously doesn’t believe it.” As if to prove her point, she pivoted toward Jorjanna and loosed one hand to indicate Daddy as evidence with her extended palm. “I mean, he sent you and didn’t come inside himself. He knows you’ve got no advantage, and he’s using you to keep his. What else did he want to say by coming here, besides that he’s still boycotting my place?”

“Just wanted me to make sure you knew he was holding you to your word—that it’ll still be next weekend. He said to tell you, ‘Burn not your house to fright the mouse away.’ ”

Savannah swung her arms and slapped her own buttocks. “No surprises there. We always go quietly, though, don’t—Hey. Where’s *Sophie*?”

Jorjanna replaced the section of chocolate orange she had been about to eat, crackled the foil wrapper closed, and wandered over to linger in the front door area, which was demarcated by

a square of tiles. “I’d have to guess she either got a ride or is jittering over her third cup of coffee in the fellowship hall, hoping we’ll wander back in again at any moment. Probably should have chosen the car, instead of the robe, after all.”

Georgia had afforded Savannah the incomparable pleasure of being wooed in its Southern ambience, an intoxicating experience more concentrated in the blood than any of the alcoholic temptations the South concocts. Fortunately or unfortunately, it does not leave the system. The larger the dose, the more it taints every breathing moment of your future, until even the air passing over your lips excites you when you recall those days. The South is always fertile and oozing with romance as honey from a comb. To eyes young in love, it appears as sweet as flowing peach syrup dripping down your hand and arm and chin when you bite hard into the flesh. Everywhere, everything coaxes you with beckoning fingers to surrender to the sense of adventure stirring inside you. Brooks, beds of ferns, honeysuckle vines, dogwood trees in full bloom and bursting into seeming snowstorms. Clear nights warm enough to walk under. Thunderstorms surprising afternoon strolls. Soft, rolling mountains. Deep, cool woods. Open fields full of wild flowers and wild animals. Thick wetness weighing down the air. White noise of insects drowning all sound but the voice nearest you and pulling the world as tight and close. The darkness there is different than the darkness anywhere else. Its warmth welcomes you, caresses your skin, and draws you into itself. Its presence is as exhilarating as a peaceful state. In it, a boy and a girl have nothing but time, or maybe, that is the last thing they keep.

“It’s not fat! It’s humanity!” Savannah yelled to her ex-boyfriend-in-the-making from the threshold of the place she had thought would position them farther from Daddy but that ended up making him feel even nearer. She was angrier in this moment than she should have been, because

she had put so much hope in this young man proving she had a future in which Daddy was in the past. Thus, his disappointing her by being so unhappy in this situation made her doubt the strength of her liberation. He was the only thing Daddy didn't know.

Her addict neighbor was out shirtless in a lawn chair on his front stoop again, and he barked after the fleeing offender. Savannah jumped at the sound of his retorts, released her grip on her food-baby, and yanked down her shirt. She unlaced one of her wedges from around her ankle and chucked it at the back shield of the departing pick-up. It landed in the bed of the truck and disappeared down the road. Her neighbor barked a laugh then, and she squinted over at him. He lowered his sunglasses down his long snout so she could see he was looking at her, too—looking her up and down.

“And *oh*, the humanity!” he howled.

With a twitch of her tail, she turned to retreat through her front door. He was on his feet, almost managing to bound from his stoop to hers in one leap. She remained, lopsided now in only one wedge, facing the door while he stood next to her. The Riverside Military Academy logo was visible on his shorts. RMA. Raping, Misogynist Animals.

“Hey, hey, hey.” His smile bristled. He drew a deep breath through his nose, moving his head to check out her butt. When he exhaled through his mouth onto her face, she waggled the tip of her nose with her finger. He said, “Looks like that cat's done with your tongue. You can spare a little one-on-one time with me now, can't you?” He bent and panted right next to her face, lolling his own tongue and pointing at it to ensure she got his witticism.

“It smells like a cat *died* on yours.”

“I won't deny it, 'cause I eat that kind of scaredy-cat for breakfast. But you ain't scared of me now, are ya?”

“Course not.” She jerked open the storm door, and he yelped in surprise as his smooth flip-flop sole slid right off the edge of the stoop and landed him in the grass. She hobbled across the threshold. But he was back up, laughing, and pulling on the handle, as she strained from the other side to pull it closed. He released it suddenly so that the door thumped closed, and Savannah, already off-balance, landed on the tile. He looked down on her through the glass, returning his hand to the handle for a moment. A drop of blood from his nose just caught the upper curve of his lip on its way down. In another moment, he wandered back over to his yard, whistling.

Savannah slammed the front door with one foot, chattering at herself for not thinking to do that in the heat of the moment, instead of fighting for the stupid storm door. She yelled, “Dirty dog!” As if on cue, a whine came from the kitchen.

Mosey was stretching his nose toward the kitchen table, on which her mushroom sauce, steak drippings, and butter-pool in her parsnip purée all sat congealing. The dog had already cleaned the man’s plate, which had been given to him by the man to make a point. She picked the plate off the floor, and Mosey shrank back. She walked to the sink, plunked down the plate as hard as she dared, and stretched her arms across the double basin. A few hot tears loosed themselves from her lower eyelashes and splayed themselves against the cool surface of the china. Mosey came and sat at her feet.

“This is *not* gonna be a dog kennel.”

That spring, when she and her boyfriend had been sitting on his back porch, this dog came sliding along the current of the brook. He struggled out of the water and onto the brambly bank. Drips coursed off his fur, until he shook himself free of them. His head turned to one side, and he studied her with that eye. The beagle in him was instantly recognizable, and later, after

consulting a poster at the vet's, she claimed the other half was American foxhound. He paced among the foliage. When she started toward him, he took steps toward her and swayed his head low.

No one claimed him, so her boyfriend kept him. Mosey showed no evidence of ever having been in a house. He maintained eye contact with her in everything new he tried while she was there. He was quick to correct himself and slow to accept permission. The day he realized it was okay to sit on the couch, he had pressed his front paws into the cushion next to her and strained his head toward her. His eyes bulged, and his back foot pawed at the cushion indecisively, warningly. She smiled, wrapped her arms around him, and heaved him fully onto the couch. He sought balance in the spongy cushions, but he might as well have been trying to cross a trampoline. She encouraged him to lie down and partly in her lap. He obeyed on command, landing in a laughably awkward position. But he did not move. He lay like that until something of his must have gone numb.

She surrendered her dinner plate to him. While he licked crescent moons into grease, she lugged his crate to the garage and placed it behind the muffler of the car. She taped garbage bags around the top, sides, and back and covered the whole structure in blankets. She called Mosey to enter the crate, locked it behind him, and started the car. She grabbed a shovel, went out back, and shut the garage door behind her. Hers was the end unit, so she dug the grave in the corner of her yard nearest her neighbor's, right up against the privacy fence, so no one could see her. She sunk the shovel blade into the loose dirt, returned to the garage, and peered into the crate.

“Oh.” Her shoulders dropped. Mosey was breathing in rapid, shallow breaths. She retrieved some plastic grocery bags and tied two over his head. The car still running, she went into the kitchen and gathered the other dishes and cookware into the sink. She pulled a glass back

out and wiped it with a paper towel. She poured herself a little pink champagne, took a seat at the table, and used her foot to drag around the other chair in order to put up her feet. When she looked into the crate the second time, Mosey was lying on his side. The bags sucked tight and vibrated against his face as he inhaled.

“Hm.” She took duct tape from a shelf and opened the crate door. She was trying to secure more bags around his lazing head, but he faintly batted them with a front paw. He loosened them and managed to wriggle from her hands. He blindly staggered around the garage and desperately scratched at the plastic. He tore open the top, saw Savannah, and came toward her with his tail wagging and the shredded plastic like white daisy petals around his neck. He stood still as she affixed more bags.

“ ‘Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.’ God! How You must feel every time You wrestle the breath from every living thing, especially when we fight so! You’re just not gonna hold still, boy, are you? So I can get—”

Savannah positioned herself behind Mosey and put her hands around his throat. The innards worked. He tried to swallow. He tried to bark. Misfires. Both exchanges died against her constricting fingers. He twisted and contorted, but he weighed only thirty-two pounds. She squeezed her knees into his narrowed waistline between his ribs and hipbones and held her grip. Finally, he pooled into a lying position. She squatted over his hindquarters and whispered beseechingly to him. He lost all firmness. He seemed to ooze and expand over the concrete. She did not remove the plastic bags from his head. She turned off the car and hoisted him.

“Oof!” He was the shape of a frown in her arms. His underbelly was wet.

She carried him out to the grave, covered him with dirt, sprayed the shovel and returned it to its proper place, tore off and threw out all the garbage bags on the crate, and put the blankets

in the washing machine. She gathered Mosey's things, shut them in the crate, taped on a "FREE" sign, and positioned it at the end of the driveway.

The evening's shadows crept from the corners of the townhouse and the deepest curves of her face. She could not tell if she was hearing the field crickets outside, or her pulse inside her head. She remained seated at the kitchen table, facing the door to the garage. Her stomach was empty, and her hands held only each other, because her mind was full. Eventually, she got into the car and backed into the night.

Dark mist shifted over the ground, which made her feel like she was swerving. Twice, dead branches on the road appeared as serpents beneath the snaking vapor. The night belonged to late spring—warm and cool, black and bright. The wind galloped through the open fields alongside her, the long grass pumping like racing horses' heads. Her clothes and hair whipped around her. She leaned forward and peered upward through the slanted windshield, to the crackling stars. There proved to be momentum in the sinews of her arms yet, and she pumped her elbows to make mighty wings of her arms. She inhaled through her nose. She was electric.

When she knew she was close, Savannah scanned the edge of the road, lined by fence and scrub. She spied her cousin's mailbox and the top of her gravel drive, pulled in, and parked at the gate. Whenever she arrived here at this time, they argued whether it was "the middle of the night," as she claimed, or "the wee hours of the morning," as Jorjanna complained. Savannah got out of the car and did not try the gate, knowing it to be locked. She hopped the fence.

From the top of this first hill, on which the highway was set, she looked across the gully to the other hill, on which she knew the house to be set, even though she could not now see it through the sleeping evergreens. The night swirled through the vale. The only other living beings were incorporeal, and the air was saturated with them; so heavy, they cling to the skin. The

meadow growth was waist-high and lashed at her legs—the bobbing motion of the heads of the grass now the fingers of thousands of old ladies shaking disapprovingly, maybe condemningly, at her. She sighed. There she stood in the middle of a judgmental mob of shadowy weeds, and she wanted for everything.

She pushed through an initial grove of shrub trees and made her way to the old barn. The door mewed like a cat. The overgrowth gave enough for her to slip through a black slit. The aged wood scratched against her ribcage, and she squeaked from the sting. She blinked and stretched her eyelids wide. The moonlight poured between the wooden slats. Some spaces were wide enough for her fingers to slide. The temperature inside matched the temperature outside, because there were no animal inhabitants. The entire structure heaved as an asthmatic lung when the wind passed through it. The loft, with its random remnant of boards, leaned toward her and pressed all its weight into the center vertical beam. The loft floor covered three-quarters of the barn’s footprint; a large square of space disclosed a tin roof. The ground floor was dirt, and open except for a stack of planks against the back wall. This barn had been dead a long time.

She crossed to a depression in the floor, untied her designer hoodie from around her waist, and balled it for a pillow. She folded her arms and rested her shoulder against the soil. She fell asleep, shuddering with the tin in the wind.

Savannah woke to Jorjanna peeling the jacket from her face.

“Sorry. It’s all tangled around your head.” The young woman, whom the world would call a “girl,” had her long, straight hair parted and half-pulled into two barrettes at the back of her head. She wore a sundress and sandals. Those four pieces were her only human-made adornments. The rest was all natural, all God. Savannah propped herself up and unraveled the turban. Jorjanna pulled strands of Savannah’s hair out of the hoodie’s zipper.

“Thanks.” Savannah massaged the arm on which she had slept. She groaned and stretched herself into standing. Jorjanna beat on Savannah’s shoulder and side to dust them. “Oh, careful. Pins and needles.” They laughed and hugged. “How are you?”

Jorjanna pulled back but held Savannah’s upper arms. “How am *I*? You’re the one holed up here.”

Savannah smiled at her solicitude until her eyes shut. “ ‘How do we face life, when it swells to this size and blasts our ears with its chesty roar?’ ”

Jorjanna studied Savannah’s face. “That bad, huh? To where you’re quoting our high-school poetry?” Jorjanna laughed again, shook her head, and released Savannah. She bent to collect a basket at her feet. “Either that, or really good ‘cause it’s the recreational pharmaceuticals talking.”

Savannah snorted and nudged Jorjanna’s shoulder. She extracted her crushed Camel pack and dehydrated lighter after an exploratory dig through her pockets, trying a few times for a spark. She finally managed to pull heat into the heart of the cigarette. Jorjanna stared.

“Ah, see, you think I’m doing bad.” Savannah removed a bit of tobacco from the tip of her tongue. “And, see, I think I’m doing pretty good. This is the only one I’ve had all day.” She began nodding, waiting for Jorjanna to show she got it. “Huh? Huh?” She backhanded Jorjanna on the upper arm to jump-start a recognition giggle. “Hey. At least when I die, I’ll go down living. Like Daddy always says for his tombstone: *He lived well, if not wisely.*” They pushed their way into the blushing sunlight. Savannah looked around her, in the grass. “You got any strawberries this year?”

“That’s why I came up here before breakfast, and how I came to hear your wheezing and honking, like an allergy-ridden giraffe.” Jorjanna checked from the corner of her eye, but the

back of the hand was not coming again. Savannah was looking to the second hill, where the cottage was now visible. Jorjanna said, “So, you coming to the house, or you a field mouse now?”

Savannah dropped her cigarette in the gravel drive. “What, like you? Never. I was just thinking: I left a perfectly good box of chocolate-covered strawberries—big as your fist—in the refrigerator.”

“You know fruit comes in other flavors besides chocolate, right? Some even come in their own flavors. Come on; I can prove it.” Jorjanna raised her eyebrows and her basket and flaunted both.

“Okay, I’ll join your little zoo.” They wandered toward Savannah’s car. Jorjanna unlocked and held the gate for her. When Jorjanna got in, she put on her seatbelt and pressed her knees together and her heels to the base of the seat. Jorjanna folded her hands in her lap but then folded her arms.

“Everything going okay over there?” Savannah asked, waiting with her foot on the brake for her cousin to settle. But she, too, felt closed into the narrow confines of a car after a night in the wide wild. It did suddenly feel like a while before they would make it to the house, when it was only 200 yards, if that. The car drew them away from the road.

Jorjanna’s spoon lazed against the side of her emptied bowl. She dampened her forefinger and mashed the crumbs and crabapple jelly globules from her plate into her mouth. She leaned back and cupped her steaming coffee mug with both hands. Savannah hunched over her oatmeal, pink with strawberries and goat’s milk. She looked up at Jorjanna’s cheeks, flushed the same color as the warm cereal.

“These strawberry-flavored strawberries aren’t very sweet. Maybe it’s because this strangely sharp oatmeal has flayed all the tastebuds off my tongue.” Savannah sat up straight and pushed the bowl away from her. “I couldn’t eat another bite.”

“Ha. Ha.” Jorjanna rose to clear the table. “Like you’ve ever managed to get your fill anyway, Savvy. The important thing is you enjoy it, right?”

“That’s the point,” Savannah tittered back to her as she studied the hand-embroidered napkin. “And it’s your prerogative to miss it entirely.” She flipped the napkin away from her. On the wall next to her was a miniature oil painting of a bird small enough to nest in one’s palm. “When did you do this?”

Jorjanna turned from the dishes and saw what Savannah was indicating. “I been learning how to mix my own paints.”

Savannah snatched a petal from among the fresh-cut flowers in a green Depression vase—a piece Jorjanna found in the barn that Savannah told her not to keep, since no one should decorate with anything from an era called “depression.” Savannah rolled her eyes at the sad thing and began tearing the petal into quarters. Behind her, drying herbs were secured with clothes pins on a string line between two doors of an old Hoosier cabinet. The rest of the cabinetry and wainscoting seemed newly whitewashed. On the countertop was a bowl of fruits, all the colors in a spectrum, and next to it, a peasant loaf and a small crock of butter were suspended between a glass pedestal and dome. Jorjanna piled the last of the dripping breakfast dishes on a towel next to the sink. The walls had been smoothed with warm brown and stenciled with yellow flowers. The windowpanes were dark yellow, which made the outside world look alien green. Tinted light ran in streams down Jorjanna’s mousey hair. She took a tea towel and turned to face Savannah, drying her hands.

Savannah huffed and swung her feet. “C’mon!” She smacked her hands down on her thighs. “We can recover from this sorry state. Let’s *do* something.”

Jorjanna shrugged. “I like to feed animal crackers to the goats.”

“Jorjanna, what the Hell? Are you serious? That’s your idea of fun?”

“Did you want me to be serious, or did you want me to be fun?”

Savannah surrendered. She ducked her head and opened one hand. “Okay. Let’s do it. Let’s do . . . the thing. Whatever. Lead on.”

Jorjanna went into the mud room and took off her sandals. She pulled on thick, bulky socks and stepped into big buckets of boots. Savannah came in, and Jorjanna handed her the pail of homemade cookies for the goats.

“Slide your feet into those mud clogs.” Jorjanna tied an apron around Savannah’s waist. She turned Savannah to face her and filled the two wide front pockets of the apron with homemade biscuit-treats for the Great Pyrenees.

Savannah rubbed circles around the bulges and said, “Hey, baby, how do you like me now with a second butt?” Jorjanna snickered and blushed, but she also reached out to pat one supposed cheek. Savannah said, “Yeah, get you some. You know you likey.”

They crossed the front yard and entered the pasture. Already, dozens of goats were trotting up the hill to meet them. The bells around their necks jingled. Jethro was visible behind them, towering over them and bringing up the rear flank. The women encircled with goats, Jethro whined and cavorted around the circumference.

“Make sure you give Jethro some treats, but only his. He may think he’s a goat, but he sure don’t process wheat flour like one.” The goats leaped over one another and bopped against the women’s legs. Savannah had to wade through this jittering mass to get within arm’s stretch

of the dog. He took a biscuit so gingerly, bounded to a distance, lay on the grass, and crunched it daintily in his slathering jowls. Savannah had tears on her cheeks.

Jorjanna called to her, “Savvy? Weren’t you supposed to have a dog of your own to feed this morning?”

“No, I got rid of him.”

Jorjanna waited a moment and called to her again, “What about a man rubbing his eyes and wondering where you are?”

“Got rid of him, too.”

“A little late for spring cleaning.”

“Even later for Sunday preaching.”

They turned toward each other in the strong current of goats, their legs invisible below the knees; the goats butting them, looking to each other, checking the ground. The women stood akimbo.

Jorjanna said, “For supposing to be so happy, you sure are being smart.”

“And you’re superstitious.” Savannah squinted her eyes as if she saw just the thing and pointed her finger at it, somewhere in front of her. “That’s precisely why I’m getting you outta here. This is a great idea and all, but you go about it entirely the wrong way.”

“I admit: this way may seem . . . limited to you—“

“Impoverished. Sacrificial. Downright ignor—“

“A wholesome life of safe investment instead of a whole-hog life of perilous spending. It ain’t a matter of you expecting too much and me expecting too little; the difference is in where we place our expectations and when we plan on getting our rewards. You’re fine once you reach

ease of body, and I keep pushing forward for peace of mind. But then again, your hideaway ain't proved all-too-effective yet."

"Little cousin, you just don't know what's in store."

Savannah sped them south out of Clermont on U.S. Hwy 129 into Gainesville, drumming her steering wheel to Indigo Girls. She detoured to the Publix on Thompson Bridge Road on the way back to the townhouse.

"This calls for a goop-goop night."

"I thought we wanted to feel *better*."

"Oh, we will." Savannah dug into her Lulu Guinness billfold for the gold Mastercard and held it next to her great big grin. Her incisors glinted. "Daddy's treat for Daddy's treats."

"Ew, gross."

"No grosser than thinking about all that junk food in your colon, when you should be thinking about all that yumminess on your tongue." Savannah released Jorjanna's seatbelt, leaned over to push open her door, gave her a quick purple-nurple, and chortled at her *yi-ee*. "It's whatever sounds good right now, so start thinking about what all you want. Cookie dough, frozen pizza, Wavy LAY'S and French onion dip, microwave White Castle cheeseburgers, anything. We'll get every morsel."

When they arrived at the townhouse, Savannah stopped the car to wait for the garage door to open. She asked her cousin in the passenger seat, "Did you see my neighbor sitting on his stoop?"

"You mean that guy there?"

Savannah heard a rap on the glass next to her head just as she was turning to see where Jorjanna had placed him. She jumped and put her hand to her chest. Lowering the window, she said, “Were your ears burning that bad?”

He leaned on the car door, reached forward, and slid one of her diamond drop day-earrings along his fingers, tapping the dangling end of it with his fingertip. “Those boulders look like they’d make your ears burn, so heavy. I’d be happy to get rid of them for you.”

“I’d be happy to get rid of you.”

He lifted his hands as if giving up, pushed off from the car, and took a step backward. Savannah pulled into the garage, but the door would not close when she pressed the button on her remote. Jorjanna twisted around to look and exclaimed. He was leaning in the doorway—his legs crossed in front of one safety sensor. Savannah got out of the car. She popped the trunk and yanked out a few bags. Jorjanna stayed where she was, not releasing her seat belt a second time. She gripped each side of the foam seat cushion.

“Got some munchies there?” he asked, walking into the garage. Savannah did not respond. “And another friend, I see. Who’s the pipsqueak?”

Savannah had set all the bags on the floor. She slammed the trunk lid and hitched her purse strap higher on her shoulder. “Down, boy,” she said, managing to look as high as the scruff on his Adam’s apple, and realizing she had never seen hair growing that far down a man’s throat. Her hand reflexively covered her own throat.

“You could get rid of me, ya know,” he said. She was so hopeful then that she was able to look him in the eye. He passed his gaze over her purple Chanel purse with its leather-woven gold chain and kicked the taught plastic handles of a couple grocery bags. “Need me some bread.”

At this, Jorjanna opened her car door and stood in the space between it and the car frame. “She ain’t got none. She ain’t what you think. You got her wrong. She’s poor as a church mouse.” He stared at Jorjanna.

Savannah bent to rummage through the bags, her purse dropping to the floor. “Here, here.” She pulled out a 2-liter bottle of Coca-Cola, which she hiked into his gut as she stood back up. He caught it like a football. “That’s the only way you’re gonna get any kinda coke by me.”

He sniffed and laughed. “Y’all having a party? Y’all know all about partying, huh? Ain’t that precious?” Cradling the soda bottle, he slunk backward, out of the garage. “I don’t wanna hafta rain the law down on ya now. So, you behave yourselves.”

Jorjanna mashed the button to close the garage door, and he struck the Heisman trophy stance until they had been cut off from his view, smiling straight through them to the back wall.

Savannah snatched the bags off the floor. “That cur liked to have ruined our ice cream.” Passing by Jorjanna, she raised one arm, braceleted with plastic bag handles, in front of Jorjanna’s stare. “Ice cream! C’mon. Scoot, scoot. Let’s skedaddle.” She kept jawing about how they had more important things to do than deal with something, but her voice trailed away up the stairs, through the door, into the kitchen, and among the susurrus of grocery bags being emptied and cast to the side in a billowy heap.

Savannah had just gotten the two of them tucked under blankets on the sofa, a smorgasbord curving out in front of them on the coffee table, with some dishes steaming and some seated in bowls of ice. They were toasting the feast by touching their Cheddar Lit’l Smokies on toothpicks to each other, when he began banging on the storm door and rattling the handle, which was locked against him. He banged some more—this time with his fist instead of his palm.

Savannah threw back her head and her blanket. “Are you kidding me?” she yelled at the ceiling. She jammed the sausage back in the dish and jumped over the armrest to get at the front door.

“Set the chain,” Jorjanna said, which Savannah did before cracking the front door. He had his back to the door, watching two Riverside cadets tussle in the grass just beyond him. Savannah knocked on the inside of her door, cupped her hand around her mouth, and called, “Hello? Anybody home?”

He swiveled, hardening his grin into a growl. “I am not joking,” he said. “I am dead serious, Missy.” He smacked the glass between their two faces. “You’re gonna get me some money.”

“I done told you,” Jorjanna yelled from the couch, “she can’t.”

Savannah lifted her French-manicured forefinger. “You know what? I’ll tell you what I am gonna get you. I’m gonna go get you my gun.”

“Savannah!”

“Oh, you got a gun?” The two cadets gamboled up behind him to gaze at her through the glass.

“Well, I know for sure what you got,” she said. “You got one minute before you find out.” With that, she shut the door. He let loose a torrent of kicks to the storm door and to the side of the townhouse. She crossed to the kitchen and blared music. Savannah and Jorjanna could hear only thumping as he seemed to pass from outside back into his house. He began knocking with a heavy object on the wall of her dining nook. They could just make out his informing them that he could hear them in the walls. He warned they had better shut up all that noise.

With the next thud, a hole opened in the dining nook wall, the crystal chandelier jolted, a cloud of shimmering pixie dust shook out of it, and a fragmenting bullet entered the opposing wall. The next one was preceded by more of a crack than a thud, now that he and Savannah were communicating through a direct airway. But Savannah was no longer addressing him.

Jorjanna and she were on the living room and kitchen floors, respectively. She belly-crawled to her cousin. They could not go out the front door, because they would not be able to enter the garage that way. They could not go into the garage from the kitchen door, because they would have to cross the wall turning into cheese. Savannah convinced Jorjanna to follow her through the sliding glass door in her bedroom, into the backyard, and into the garage from there. Jorjanna held onto the back of Savannah's shirt the whole way. Screaming for a split second in the car over whether they should open the garage door now or wait, they went for it, squealing through their locked jaws as Savannah stomped it in reverse, a pack descending on them from their left flank.

Jorjanna sat at her dining table—secure against a solid wall—that someone from church had hauled out of their basement and gifted to her with no marks or damage that could not be covered by a cotton cloth. She folded her arms around her knees. Savannah had her nose in the refrigerator. She came out shaking a squeeze-bottle of ketchup.

“After all, what’s the worst that could’ve happened?” Savannah asked.

“Um, getting shot!” Jorjanna said.

“Oh, yeah? That’s the worst?” Savannah flipped open the top of the ketchup bottle.

“Seems pretty obvious.”

“Like this?” Faster than a spring-trap, Savannah sprayed Jorjanna in the chest with the ketchup. Jorjanna’s limbs all splayed out at once and balanced there—extended in the air—as she looked down at the red stain. For a moment, she did kind of look like she was being blown back by a shot to her core. When she looked up at Savannah, her eyebrows twitched rapidly. Savannah stopped laughing and lost control of the ketchup bottle to Jorjanna all too easily in her sudden terror of retaliation. She turned tail to flee, but Jorjanna unloaded a burst of ketchup into her hair. Savannah grabbed the mustard out of the refrigerator on her way out of the room. Jorjanna came after her, but Savannah stepped out from around the corner and sprayed her with the mustard, escaping out the front door while Jorjanna responded again in dismay.

“Hey, that one stains,” Jorjanna yelled in complaint.

“No loss there,” Savannah called from outside.

When Jorjanna got there, Savannah had slipped off and abandoned her ballet flats along with the mustard bottle, so Jorjanna busied herself filling both shoes with ketchup and mustard. She stood up smiling, and a spray of water struck her in the teeth and the corner of her mouth. Savannah stopped spraying her with the hose long enough for Jorjanna to see what had happened; then, Savannah reopened the stream. But Jorjanna was already soaked, mustarded, and ketchupped. She charged—the two bottles held over her head—directly into the line of fire. The hose nozzle thumped on the ground. The bottles were down to dribbles. Jorjanna unleashed the hose spray into Savannah’s back as Savannah ran, and Savannah went down, sliding a wide green swath along her front. Jorjanna dropped her weapon and stripped off her clothes as she retreated to the shower, Savannah shouting after her to agree that the worst was the best! Jorjanna started the washing machine during Savannah’s turn in the shower and chose a hot cycle. She put in her clothes only.

The next day, both cousins groaned when they saw Daddy through the kitchen window—jaundiced from the tinted glass.

“He is risen,” Savannah said to Jorjanna.

“Hmm. Indeed,” Jorjanna answered.

“Are we excited?” he called. He had drug the hose from where it lay in the front yard. He swept the spray against the house, side to side. “Oh, boy. Oh, boy. Oh, boy.” Then, he stopped and looked at them in the window, looked at Savannah over Jorjanna’s left shoulder. He aimed at her. The incoming water smacked the glass, and in the distortion, Daddy disappeared from their view. They heard him singing, *This is the day, This is the day, that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made; Let us rejoice, Let us rejoice, and be glad in it, and be glad in it.* The girls were gone from the window by the time the onslaught spent itself. They had scuttled to the living room.

“Will the joys never cease?” Savannah asked. “I bet now you believe me that being shot would have been the best thing.” She pulled her compact mirror out of her purse and slapped it back in there without opening it. “Oh, what’s the use? It’s impossible not to look stranded out here.”

“Hey, I’d be more than happy to stay right here, all by my lonesome, while you head on back to your precious townhouse and spend the day dealing with all the police you can handle, over being robbed up one side and down the other, six ways to Sunday by now. You just need to tell Daddy Souris, and we’re both home-free.” Jorjanna looked around for her denim shoulder bag made from her old jeans. They could hear Daddy thwapping the hose against the side of the house as he wrapped it around the wall-mounted holder.

“Well, at least I know what’s coming this way.” Savannah headed out the front door and held the screen door for Jorjanna. “It’s far from our first time.”

“It sure feels like it.” Jorjanna took her keys off the wall hook.

“Give it a chance; soon enough, it’ll feel all too familiar.” Jorjanna shut and locked the front door. Savannah let the screen door close. They walked toward Daddy’s car. Savannah nudged Jorjanna. “Now, what’s our mantra?”

They could see Daddy coming around the house.

“It’s only dinner,” Jorjanna answered.

“It’s only dinner!”

“It’s only dinner. Just sitting out there. Set up so nice. For what we are about to receive, may we be truly sorry.”

At the car, they each hugged Daddy, Savannah smiling and saying, “Hey, Daddy. Free food is *always* exciting. That’s good for something.” She gave him some sugar on his cheek, without his asking. He opened the car door for her. “Every single little somebody knows that.” She winked at Jorjanna—the corner of her mouth tightening into her cheek—and shooed her to get herself into the car as well. “Pain is temporary; pleasure is eternal,” she said, vanishing.

They slid into leather seats, Daddy’s creaking as he turned to look at Savannah next to him. Her fresh, blond, curled, ribboned ponytail jounced while she situated her skirt, crossed and tucked her legs, set her purse in her lap, and folded her hands atop it. Jorjanna rubbed the back of her own head, smoothing her tresses with the sweat of her palms.

Daddy said to Savannah, “You’re just getting more and more like your cousin every day. Every single, blessed day. Even today, changing where you’ll be; wearing her clothes.” The ends of the waistband ribbon of Jorjanna’s sundress on Savannah were caught in the door, flipping

around loose on the other side. Jorjanna had used the extra ribbon after finishing the dress to make the matching hair-tie in Savannah's hair.

“Finding me in this condition should give anyone—even you, Daddy—the teeniest-tiniest notion that something's wrong. I've been a bit hounded of late, and if it wasn't for Jorjanna letting me wear this dress of hers, then I'd be meeting whatever-her-name-is in an outfit I'd had on since Thursday morning and that had been through the mill since that time; let me assure you.”

“Claire.”

“*Comme le cristal ? Je suis ravie que nous nous comprenions. Ça comment bien !*” She smirked and slid on her Fendi sunglasses with the metal-accented tips like two little pointy ears sticking out past her temples.

“Very funny.” Daddy put on his own Ray-Ban Original Wayfarer shades. “You are my daughter after all. You get all that from me. Are we finally ready to go?”

Savannah reached over and started the car. She took it out of first gear, waggled the gear shift, and slid it into reverse. “Whither thou goest, Daddy. Whither thou goest.” She turned the air-vent flaps away from her face, tamed her eyebrows with licked fingertips before her vanity mirror, and flipped the visor.

“Hang on then, girls.”

Daddy was driving them the two hours south, out of the Appalachian Mountains and into the foothills, wherein lay Marietta. The air conditioning blasted against the Georgia sun. Even though it was setting, Jorjanna, in a one-piece romper, had to rip her thighs from the leather to readjust. Daddy wore a baseball cap and loafers without socks. His forelock curled beneath the pushed-back brim of his hat. He turned on his CD player, and the Eagles blared out of the

speakers. He feigned a fearful jump, shouted “those damn kids,” did not adjust the volume, and opened his mouth wide to sing “Take It Easy.” His smile dipped into his cheeks when he looked at Savannah next to him. He turned down the music.

“Did you know your daddy could play the horn?” he asked her.

“Daddy, no.” Savannah stretched across and grasped both his hands on the steering wheel, as though any woman could keep those hands grounded. Her left hand squeezed his married hand, and her right hand squeezed the hand he liked to shake in the air and call his single hand, in case there were any takers, or givers.

“What do you think, Jorjanna?” he called over his shoulder. “You wanna hear me play the horn, don’t you?”

Both girls knew one woman could trump another with Daddy, that he even looked for them to do so. For fourteen years, Savannah had laughed at this joke of Daddy’s, while Jorjanna had never managed. Jorjanna had an opportunity here to allow him to enjoy himself while he believed he was pleasing her, but she bent herself in half and ducked below the window. Daddy honked long and loud and wove like a spawning salmon along the current of interstate traffic. Savannah gripped the door and squealed in glee. He settled back into the flow and turned off the music. He was going to exit. They knew, even if he never used his indicator.

“Won’t be long now, girls. Just you wait. One taste. Just one, and I swear. You’re gonna love her. She is the sweetest ambrosia.”

Claire first appeared as a thin, vertical line wavering on the horizon. As she came into focus, her hands were folded in front of herself. She had pale, bobbed hair and an ankle-length, dark, stiff dress. It may have even been black. After Easter. And Daddy always saying how sophisticated and proper they were in Atlanta. Savannah had been leaning forward but settled

back in her seat. Jorjanna slouched and looked at the neighboring homes, wondering what they were offering for supper and just how far Southern hospitality would stretch.

Claire smiled and waved as Daddy eased to a stop beside her. Daddy got out of the car first. He put his fingertips on Claire's hip. Savannah drew a swift breath through her nostrils, raised her eyebrows at Jorjanna, and opened her door. Her head and shoulders disappeared as well. Both doors shut, and Jorjanna watched their three bodies swim around outside the car and felt the vibrations of their voices through the glass. Eventually, Daddy tapped on Jorjanna's window with the flat square of his forefinger-tip. Claire's face popped down to window level. She shook both palms at Jorjanna and then opened the car door. Jorjanna inched out.

Claire launched toward her with an extended hand in anticipation of a shake. Jorjanna cowered, backing into Daddy Souris's arm, firm around her. He gripped her above the elbow, and her arm bent upward just in time to receive Claire. Savannah pointed out her own smile to Jorjanna and nodded. Daddy Souris jiggled her a bit before releasing her. Claire ducked her head and led the way. Savannah snuck in the slightest curtsy as Claire and Daddy passed. Jorjanna stepped on the back of Savannah's shoe, and Savannah shot a stiff palm behind herself but caught no flesh. Jorjanna sniggered, almost bumping into Savannah—stopped in her tracks.

Savannah had passed through the arbor trellis into an English-style garden enclosed by towering but trimmed hedges. Her jaw slackened. Claire's home was a red-brick Tudor. Savannah tapped the caps of some lilies of the valley and poked a few asters in their fuzzy cores. Claire released Daddy's hand to show the girls how to pinch open the jowls of a snapdragon. Daddy wandered around the side of the house, asking whether the grill was ready. But Claire had started telling the girls, in a breathless but animated voice, the folktale of Queen Anne's Lace,

pointing out the black dot—otherwise known as the entangled evil witch—in the center of one mature specimen.

As the three ladies came around the house, the croquet course stretched across the backyard came into view. A picnic table and benches and potted herbs and vegetables graced the concrete patio. Daddy was picking Japanese beetles off his signature tomatoes and roses, which lined two sides of the lawn against a decorative brick-and-iron fence. Savannah and Jorjanna were accustomed to items he had effected sitting in wait in homes where he did not live and they had not been. It was no longer a mystery to them how he spread his presence; the wonder in their lives was why, when he always seemed to be everywhere, it was his absence that felt more prominent. The three found him lecturing Claire about letting pests hang about the place, as if he never realized they were not right behind him, and they kept going, climbing the steps into the rear entrance of Claire's house.

The remains of squeezed orange glistened in the bottom of a juice glass on the kitchen counter. The afternoon sun lit up the abdomens of the molded green bumble bees on the side of the glass. Claire grabbed it and apologized, crossing to the sink to rinse it. Savannah wondered whether she had taken the jolt of fructose to steady her nerves before their arrival, whether the dampened cloth—crumpled where the glass had been—had dabbed sweat off her face and throat.

“Smells like luck,” Daddy said, coming inside. The other three grinned. Daddy had trained each of them in this joke. In the beginning, whenever he would enter a home in which someone was cooking for him, he would say, *Smells in here like I'm lucky I'm not fatter than I am*. Once well-versed, the woman got the diminution. Daddy and Claire began discussing his grilling the pork loin stuffed with rice, apricots, nuts, and a little cayenne and covered in bacon,

and when to begin coating it with the apricot preserves. So, Savannah and Jorjanna wandered farther, into the dining room.

A table was draped with a blushing pink linen cloth, and a crocheted ivory cover over that. The placemats had the palest floral pattern. The china was ivory with big pink flowers, green leaves, and brown twigs around the rims. The cloth napkins were folded into roses and centered on the dinner plates. Crystal candleholders of varying heights sparkled amid crystal goblets and golden flatware. Some blossoms from Daddy's rose bushes were arranged in a high-gloss ceramic vase. Iridescent party confetti sprinkled the centerpieces. Cherrywood chairs had bulging bows with long tails tied on their backs. The light from the candles caught every edge and curve.

From there, Savannah raised her voice to compliment Claire on her home, saying it was so pretty, that everything was just lovely, really, that she prayed she could make hers as nice in time. She then asked for the bathroom so that she and Jorjanna could wash up. The girls stood in front of the marble-top sink and looked at each other in the broad mirror screwed flat against the wall. Savannah turned, checked the hall, and closed the door. She locked it.

"This is amazing," she said. She turned on the water and stuck out her hands.

"Yeah, this is so you." Jorjanna watched her cousin in the mirror.

"What do you mean?" Savannah flicked half a look at Jorjanna in the mirror. Jorjanna nudged her out of the way with her hip and jut her own hands into the stream. Savannah took the hand towel to dry.

"You know you're a Martha: always going to all these lengths to make everything all fancy. This woman clearly does the same. Everything to be admired, comfy, enjoyed. Living to hunker down, with a companion to impress."

“Hey, I know you’re mad at me, but you don’t have to be ugly about it.” Savannah turned off the water and kept her hand on the faucet handle. Jorjanna turned to look directly at Savannah, who held out the towel, but Jorjanna wiped her hands on her backside.

“You’re the one being ugly. *Everybody’s gotta be pleased. Everybody’s gotta be stuffed. Everybody’s gotta be happy.* But you don’t do it because you care; you do it because you’re desperate to feel good. About yourself.” They worried inside each other’s eyes for a moment. They knew you could speak the truth to a person, as long as the person knew you loved her. Savannah folded and rehung the towel. Her shoulders rose and fell, more than once.

“This takes everything I’ve got, JoJo. It takes my breath away, so I can’t hardly breathe.”

Jorjanna asked Savannah’s reflection, standing next to her own, “How’d you ever bring yourself to leave?”

Savannah looked at Jorjanna’s reflection, a slightly shorter and narrower version of herself. She opened her mouth for a moment and then closed it again, so she could swallow before she spoke. She picked up a fingertip towel and twisted it. “How did you? You knew how I felt about being left.”

“I did only have to leave I you, Savvy; you’re the one who had to leave your father.”

Savannah turned to Jorjanna, jouncing a towel-point to accentuate her words. “You left both of us, and you knew, you knew Mama had been the only one, the only one. And she had good reason. That meant I had to be there for the hardest part ever, didn’t it? The hardest part. I’m still trapped.”

Jorjanna looked down. “I lured myself into thinking I’d find a little breathing room, too. But there ain’t fulfillment in this life. I’ve never once had one deep, satiating breath.”

Savannah's smile was upside down—into her chin, instead of her cheeks. She looked down, too. “You never have managed to get your fill, have you?”

They both studied shoes—the rounded toes of ballet flats and the sprawling toes of sneakers. A tear splayed across the rubber toe cap on Jorjanna's. Without looking at her, Savannah pulled Jorjanna into her arms.

“Oh, don't be so humble. C'mon now. One of these times, it's bound to be different.” Savannah held Jorjanna out in order to look at her, squeezing her biceps as though trying to hold onto the idea, to harness it to her. “There's just no pleasing you. You're so liberated. Free of fear.”

“And there's no satisfying you. You're insatiable. Full of danger.”

They looked at each other, comforted in their obedience to these laws, when they knew there would be no grace.

Daddy, bringing in the meat, was the first to seat himself at the table. Claire hovered to ask whether everyone would like champagne. The girls took seats upon that. She rushed off and returned with a chilled bottle and slim flutes. Daddy waited for everyone to be settled, and then, he popped the cork and filled the glasses—Claire's by far the most. He put the back of his hand to the side of his mouth and whispered to Savannah and Jorjanna, “She drinks more than all of us put together.”

“Oh!” Claire exclaimed and slapped him on the arm. He shouted.

“Careful! Careful! You'll spill my cough syrup.” He set down the bottle. “Everyone content?” Savannah settled deeper into her nest with wriggling hips. She smiled out at Claire and Jorjanna, who could not help but reflect her expression, thereby passing this back to Daddy.

“Good. I always tell the girls it is important to find their joy.” He raised his glass. “You girls are seeking your joy, aren’t you?”

Savannah and Claire lifted their glasses high. Jorjanna, not being of age, barely cleared the tabletop with hers. Savannah said, “Yes, Daddy.” Claire added, “Always.”

“It’s the most important thing.” He clinked Savannah’s glass. “Most important.” He finagled his glass around a few items to tap Jorjanna’s glass, already resting again on the table. “See, my girls know this. We have an understanding.” He clinked Claire’s glass. “We’re very close. They understand me better than anyone else, and they’re just like me, just like this old man. And this one?” He looked upon Claire. “She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed. She puts up with me pretty good. Sometimes, she gets royally angry at me, which she prob’ly ought do.” He tilted his glass toward each of them one more time. Then, he shut his eyes, drew in the sparkling gold, and sighed.

Daddy swiveled his glass in the air and began to tell the story of his meeting Claire to the only three who already knew it. Executive Assistant to a partner of a fee-only financial advisory firm, Claire had been in Gainesville with her boss for a public seminar the company was presenting. Daddy stopped into a gas station and was in the back of the store, waiting on the single bathroom. He heard a lot of banging and clunking. Claire emerged, smoothing the fabric of her suit jacket over her ribs. Her cheeks were flushed. She had not eaten during the busyness of the day but had taken a few cocktails at the afternoon reception and in the limousine. This had left her incapacitated to contend with a broken paper towel dispenser crooked on a wall in a gas station bathroom. He asked her whether she’d been getting a wall-job in there. She glazed, with one hand on the metal door frame to reorient herself. All her effort went to bringing him into focus before her. Daddy tattled to Savannah and Jorjanna that Claire finally retorted, cupping the

ends of her hair and drawling her eye-blinks, the left more than the right, “I have become untidy.” When he had admitted he would be doing the same, if she did not step aside, out of his way, she simply said, “That would be disfortunate.”

At the table, the two of them laughed in unison, lunging forward together and then back, like a couple on a roller coaster. Savannah knew this pleased Daddy. He did not expect anyone to contribute more than a listening ear, or to interrupt with more than bursts of laughter. He was a Southern gentleman and would not tolerate blatant rudeness or obvious interference.

Eventually, Claire stopped laughing and started pouting. “Oh, you’re bad. You shouldn’t have told your girls that. Now what will they think of me? And it’s all your fault, not mine. I wash my hands.”

Daddy put his hands flat on the table to bellow, “That’s it. This establishment has treated me abominably. I’m never coming here again; I tell you. I’m never coming here again!” Savannah and Jorjanna grinned. Claire touched his forearm and started to apologize. Daddy smiled and put his hand on top of hers on his arm and said, “Oh, honey, your anger is like butterfly wings disturbing the sunset.” She squeezed his thigh. Daddy and Claire left each other, then, to enjoy their meals.

Afterward, Daddy pushed away from the table and rubbed his belly. “It’s disgusting how they do me here. I was grossly over-served.” Claire looked down on the girls; she had done good work. Savannah and Jorjanna forgave her, because they knew Claire could have no idea who she was in this situation. She believed she had some sort of ownership here; the women always did.

Daddy said he would stretch himself a bit under the coolness of the moon, “But first.” He got up and went to scoop up the watermelon off the kitchen floor. He cradled it with one hand and drew a carving knife with the other. Savannah guessed those were their options, unsure

which she would pick. “Thumped it myself at the stand,” Daddy said, “and it’s a fine melon. Fine.”

He hacked the fruit into four triangular hunks. His exaggerated movements testified to his awareness of their attention and warned that they should not necessarily trust what they were seeing. He flourished his gestures and aspect, and they blushed. One at a time, he brought the quarters to them, and each took her share from him slowly, as if it were too wieldy, as if they could not manage it—that wobbling wedge on a paper plate. He shook out paper napkins and draped them across their laps. Claire tried just to grab her napkin from him, but he snatched it back and played keep-away with her. She eventually surrendered and then thanked him. Once he had them all waiting for him to join them, he gathered it all back up, guffawing and confirming it was all, of course, a ruse and that he was going to grill the watermelon for dessert.

The ladies did not move, until they heard him leave the house. They carried the dishes and leftovers to the kitchen, checking on him through the window and exchanging the lightest teases about him. Then, they settled in the sitting room. On the small sofa, Claire sat with her legs tucked to her side and her hips pivoted—a pink check mark. Her arms were bent tight over her breasts, and with both hands, she sorted through her hairs to a solitary strand. Her forefingers and thumbs slid along it, over and over. Finally, she tugged it free with a snap as on a bell-pull. She examined it, gliding her fingers along the invisible hair in midair. She wrapped it around her forefingers before discarding it on the floor and repeating the process. Savannah adjusted her skirt hem and scratched her calf ever so lightly so as not to pick her stockings-on-loan.

Claire started with, “You’re not going to believe this.” This was the only truth she could have spoken. How could Savannah and Jorjanna believe anything any of these women said, when they were positioned to speak from a place of such ignorance? Truth was revealed, not

discovered. The women could not help themselves. Claire took a deep breath and seemed to want to pace herself. “I have the worst taste.” Savannah and Jorjanna blinked at her and around the room—at the filigree in her nail-less furniture crafted from a thousand gouges, at her books on French Impressionist paintings, at her fairly traded jewelry from women’s hands of varying golden tones. “In men,” she appended. Savannah and Jorjanna nodded.

“I’ve picked one bad apple after another, yet they keep catching my eye. Each time, I’m shaking their hands, and I’m thinking I’ve met my next great love, that I’m looking straight into the eyes of my future.” She paused, shook her head. “But then, I think, *It’s only a matter of time before you find out something really bad about him, and it’s going to hurt so much, and the part of you that knew it all along is going to call the other part of you ‘stupid.’* But I don’t wanna ruin a good thing, if it should turn out to be. Your father, your uncle, he’s a good man, and he loves you both very much. He talks about you all the time.”

They all said that. Even Sophie had, when it had been her turn. So much strength in the beginning, yet never enough. The difference between believing you are in possession of something, that you carry weight, and finally realizing your hands are empty. Savannah sensed Sophie knew what was happening better than Daddy, better than his gal-pals, better than anybody. Savannah, too, tried to keep her eyes open in that way, even though it stung. The trick was not to personalize it, to the point where you developed a voice. She wanted to let Daddy be right on this one; he so rarely was. Jorjanna’s attention switched to Savannah, when Savannah sounded to be whimpering. Savannah *was* crying. Looking down at her knees, pale as hope.

“It’s true,” Savannah said. “Men can sure make you feel bad about being a woman. They don’t lead you to God by the hand; they drive you to God on your knees.” Claire considered Savannah a moment. She must have known, as well as Jorjanna, that this was not the Savannah

anyone ever met. It was beginning to look like no one was comforting anyone else in this room, and it was no longer discernible who was seeking comfort or had it coming to them.

Jorjanna, who rarely had to speak during these occasions, leaned toward Savannah and whispered, “I don’t think you should venture out any farther on this one, Savvy. Maybe it’s time to just shut the ol’ pie hole. Devil can’t know your thoughts, unless you speak them out loud. Let’s not go and arm the rascal with any more weapons to use against you.”

“Oh, JoJo, you’re the only one who still cares. You should know better; love only gets you in trouble. Just look at the two of us, here. Totally exposed. Just look at you with me. Or at God with any of us, for pity’s sake.” She pawed her face in frustration with it, as if she could get its misbehavior under control without it distracting anyone from the importance of what she was saying. “Daddy just uses us for an exit strategy, whenever he needs one. We’re an escape route for him. That’s why he won’t set us loose.”

Daddy cleared his throat. Blind-sided, the three leaped. He set down on the coffee table four plates with cubed grilled watermelon, a chiffonade of fresh mint, and a dollop of whipped yogurt and feta cheese. He had sliced out the heart, and the pulp was ruby red from the heat.

“Y’all are so startled, but I wasn’t the one being stealthy. Please go on; I didn’t mean to cut your tale off right there in the middle like that.”

“I’m done,” Savannah said.

He strode toward Savannah’s quivering face and wiped at her tears on her puffy cheeks with his forefingers and pinkies. She hiccupped. “Hmmm. You’re very wise. You’ve picked up on all my silliness. Although she won’t believe it. She thinks I make it all up as I go.” He stroked Savannah’s throat with his thumb. “ ‘Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, I will be ashamed of them when I am in my glory.’ ” One more tear plummeted down her cheek and ran

along the edge of his thumb, all the way down his wrist. “Jorjanna, remind your cousin what Pastor’s been working through in his sermons.”

“The Ten Commandments.”

“And inform your cousin which one she missed on Sunday.”

Savannah answered before Jorjanna could. “The Fifth, Daddy. And on purpose.”

“That’s right. You’re so smart. You’ve got everything figured out pretty well for yourself. But I bet you didn’t know dishonoring your parent is the second sin mentioned in the Bible where God demands the death penalty—the first one, of course, being premeditated murder. Follows right on the heels of that one and right on the heels of the Commandments. Kinda makes it the same thing, in my book.”

Savannah, who had been made into his image, squirmed.

Jorjanna choked a little on her own spit. “Daddy Souris.” He did not turn immediately. “Now, it’s true that the Greek in John’s gospel suggests God’d *rather* have the love of the people than save the one and only child from humiliation in front of them. But what would we all think of God, if God *caused* the child’s insecurity and suffering? I mean, what’ll happen to Claire’s love?”

A spotlight followed Daddy everywhere, just as ladies did, and caressed him as softly. He was always on, and when his attention passed near anyone, they felt the glow. Savannah squinted in the confusion of whether she yearned for Daddy’s pleasure as much as his displeasure. Jorjanna’s face warmed. He came to put his right hand upon her burning cheek, which he stroked with his thumb. She would bite it, if he smiled at her. Her cheek, not his thumb. To release the blood.

Savannah rose and took Daddy's hand and, thus, his attention. But she had managed to arrest it in order to reach into his pocket and snag his car keys. She pulled on Jorjanna's arm to get her to stand and pushed Jorjanna before her, back toward the kitchen, shoving her hard enough to indicate she should go out the back door.

"What are you doing?" Daddy asked.

Savannah thanked Claire for a wonderful meal, joking that her greatest upset in life was to see good food go to waste. She snagged Jorjanna's and her purses, as she backed out of the room.

"We aren't going," Daddy said.

Claire looked between the two of them and asked Savannah whether she was sure they had their fill.

"Mercy me, we couldn't possibly swallow another bite. *Santé passe richesse.*" Savannah turned and rushed the door. Before she could quite get it closed behind her, with her little nose in the crack, she could see Daddy in pursuit. She checked that Jorjanna was nowhere in the back, and then, she high-tailed it down the stairs. But Daddy came from behind and swung her around to face him on the patio. Claire was already on the stoop, reaching her hands out to them but proceeding no farther. She looked across at her neighbors' properties.

"You're not going anywhere."

Savannah shoved him, and as he lost his balance, his hand landed on the grill. The grill fell on its side, spreading hot charcoal residue underneath him. Clasp ing his burned hand against his chest and staggering to stay on his feet, he nevertheless landed on his butt right in the smoldering bed of coals and ash and shouted at the scalding before he rolled out of it. Claire bolted inside. Savannah did not want to wait the few minutes to find out which Claire had gone

inside to call: the police or the ambulance. But Daddy was crying in such a small way. In a way she did not know he could cry.

He was on his side, his chino shorts singed on his bottom, and he was murmuring to the concrete beneath him, “Savannah. Don’t. Not like this. Savannah, darling. You’re not supposed to be the one.” He was right. Finally. For the first time in her life, she felt like kissing him. So, she smiled at him, tenderly, although he would never see it.

She kneeled next to him, lifted his head, and slipped her soft, padded leather purse beneath it. “We can do better,” she said and mouthed her fare-well. When she stood, she took her last look of him and made her peace with herself for doing so. He peered up at her out of the corner of his eye and beseeched her with a “no.” His last look of her would be her looking down on him. She reminded herself of how many would be proud of her. Then, she slipped into the black, in the direction her cousin had headed.

Ex Nihilo

Rosh Hashanah La'Llanot
Tu B'Shevat, Thursday, 23 January 1997
Willow Glen neighborhood, San Jose, CA 95125

I have been made by scarred hands. In a flash, a spark sprung above an open palm of light. Born in this place where light is not separated from light by gaps of darkness. No lines drawn. It took no labor to form me; it was not work. Those hands cup warm around me. My belly set aglow. I shimmer—much like the eyes of that one who smiles down at my being. My core remains crystal clear, but from my sides curl out soft, pale fronds. When I look at my shape, it is not obvious my limbs are sprouting. They appear disjointed, disconnected. Loose stems out of nothing.

Lifted high, I see I am a presence in a multitude, and that the many have been the singing I hear. They celebrate what my origin means. With a breath at my back, I am suspended in air; I could believe it is by the cheers. Where else will I witness these heights of joy again? A fist of wind snatches me away and carries me from this expansiveness, into confine. We rush into the place of distinctions, layers, and surfaces. I feel the boundaries of myself against weighty vapor.

Moonlight presses the backs of a bird's wings and the top of its head; blue ice lightens its belly and the underside of its tail. We soar past it and course between a bluff and bristle-backed rocks squatting in the water nearby. For miles, the wetness warms, until I spy mist threading its way around two dozen redwood seedlings freshly planted along a barren stream bank. An establishment of resistance on this day. Faiths have been there.

We slow as we come the farthest inland we have been, though still skimming along above a bay of water, so as to cross under three bridges. We glide over a marshy shoreline, into the firmament of a city, and finally among orderly rows of low, boxy homes with wraparound and canoping courtyards of orange and lemon trees, oaks and birches, cedar and pine, ginkgoes and willows, gums and ironbarks, ash and acacia, alders and poplars, cherry and hackberry, olive and pear. More besides. Some awake; some asleep. All sighing in the night breeze. They are relieved that one more has arrived, for each one like me shortens the duration. They want to be closer. They fan their branches at us, and the front door rattles as we race under it.

Once inside, I wonder at my having considered the world up to this point close and dark. I am so contained that I fear I have been absorbed. Every inch of me comes up against this clingy, shadowy fluid. Darkness. I must be swallowing it even. I cannot shake it off my limbs. Flat, broad verticals and horizontals are above, below, behind, before, beside. The wind whips me around a corner to go deeper still, from a vaulted to a stunted ceiling. I can no longer see anything of the trees; the floor-to-ceiling windows in the common areas of the house are left behind us. We swoop under another door and stop. I know we are at the end. There is no light. But I hear breath.

The wind seats me on squashy, hot damp. Then, the wind blows on me, and my shine stretches into the space. Five slim fingers rise around me, like trees on the edge of a glade. I stand and lean out between the thumb and forefinger to peek at the sleeping face. Mine is young. Not yet 13. My life may be long, then. I can see one of her eyes, closed and still. The dark eyebrow, thin as her pinkie, is relaxed. The wind moves her hair off her face, draws it out of the corner of her mouth. Her finger twitches, and falling, I lean backward. The wind blankets me with the girl's fist just before she inhales, and the wind is absorbed. I wrap my limbs around one of her fingers and begin my wait. Tonight will be the last night she is afraid of the dark. But when she finds me in the morning, and for the rest of her days with me, she will feel the pleasure and pain of my homesickness. She must. I am here to ensure it. In humans, only hope eradicates fear, which is the errant step they take most frequently, as well as that against which they have been warned and encouraged the most frequently. Sadness ignores fear. Anger suppresses it. Happiness muddles it. But belief shifts perspective, where fear dwells.

To have a beginning means there is much to come of me, for me, from me. Getting started means I have a long way to go and grow. I have everything I need to begin this journey, but I am far from perfected. I will hold onto her, and she will hold onto me, and together, we will get there. I do not know whether, at the culmination, upon my second arrival, I will have another glimpse of the place of my making before I die—my purpose fulfilled. Yes, there are some things I do not know; like humans, I can only hope.

Festival of Sukkot

Saturday, 22 October 2016

Sherman Park neighborhood, Milwaukee, WI 53216

It is weeping. So, who knows how long it will last? When the strawberry mark on her cheekbone appears, when her head sinks, when her shoulders begin seizing, then I touch her shoulder from where I stand beside her, so she turns in her seat at the table to see me stride out the nearest exit of the auditorium theater in the church basement. I look through the windows in the double doors to ensure she is stumbling after me; it does no good to lose her, especially when she is doing no good on her own. She mourns when she believes she has seen the end, only because she has not seen the end. If she had, she would not. I do not.

Our church is an endless labyrinth. New members—of whom we are among the last—go “snooping” (as her last grandparent to be lifted to Shekinah used to call having a look about a place), and they find themselves needing to backtrack to escape its depths. Even the longest-term

members struggle to find what they need in the commercial-sized kitchen; no one ever seems to know where anything is in there. The right hand doesn't know or agree with where the left hand normally keeps a thing and inevitably puts it back where the left hand would never think to look. Sometimes, they are so long in their seeking and have uncovered so many other items they had been seeking upon another occasion that they forget what they were after.

All around the large sanctuary branches out: a fellowship hall; a smaller sanctuary with its own facilities and meeting-greeting areas; a youth-group den; a hall of offices; a suite of rooms with a common area that could serve as a children's school; rooms for choir practice and Sunday school classes, for hosting the local food pantry, for preparing the communion meals, and for counting the offering; then the storage, utility, and maintenance rooms—some of which evoke the feelings of the first archeologist to enter a tomb whose air a living being has not breathed in generations; and, a few empty rooms to boot. Most of these spaces and the goods they contain seem abandoned. These amenities were used regularly at some point. And to leave everything ready for spontaneous use suggests a belief that the activities will commence again at any moment. Instead of looking like people left suddenly, it rather looks like people are expected to return imminently. As if they were called away just for a moment. In much the same way as the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, how typical of Protestantism to keep building and building in order to confuse haunting ghosts. Religion has never once felt “organized” to me. If *only* Protestants could use this word to describe their history, practices, and experience! No, it's an oxymoron.

She follows me out of the room; I never get very far from her. Sometimes, this means I must chase after her, and sometimes, it means I must wait for her. Rarely are we in pace with one another. She stops a few places to lean against a wall or sink down against a baseboard in order to give in to the convulsions of her sobs, as she moves through all her options for expressing loss. But we make it to the main sanctuary. Four sections of pews each widen as they stretch back through the nave. An enormous balcony is shadowy, its stairways roped closed. More stored items jut up where heads should peer over the edge. Like everywhere else in this world, objects outnumber and engulf people. The vaulted, multi-faceted, wooden ceiling channels attention to the east wall: a floor-to-lofted-ceiling tile mosaic that emulates cascading water and sparkles with gold tiles scattered among the blues, greens, and white. Rough-hewn sandstone walls flank the chancel. A shiny gold hoop passes through the four extensions of the twenty-foot, matte gold cross centered on the tile wall. To the left, on the wide floor space in front of the organ, hunkers a grand piano. The space could but does not accommodate a choir and several seated musicians. The organ pipes are in the top half portion of the wall, high above, and behind screening—the metal bones just visible, ready to wail like risen skeletons. However, our organ player passed into glory this year, along with eleven other members, which accounts for ten percent of the congregation, the median age being around 60. My human is the youngest adult member at 32.

This spring, a photographer approached our church council for permission to capture this “vibrant piece of the Modern era in church architecture,” which had been “so perfectly preserved.” When he said that, the women took the stances of proud parents with their hands on their hips and their feet set wide, and the men of sure salesmen with folded arms against bowed-back torsos. They said the church did, indeed, get lots of people's praise—pun intended. Yet

there is always a sadness in the way they agree it is glorious to behold. They granted the photographer access so that many might have the chance to see it yet.

The sanctuary has been reduced by a partition wall of glass in finished wooden framing. This transparent boundary allows the light passing through the stained-glass windows in the face of the building to fall over the shoulders of those in the pews. She lands in a pew and presses her hand against her mouth, as if she could push her sobs back into her face and down her gullet. I luxuriate in the long strips of colored light near one entrance to the church. I have recovered a great deal of my health in the three years since we have lived on our own again, and especially in the last two since I established us here in the Midwest for her return to school—something she should have done years ago. When freely professed, I am almost as tall as she is right now, which makes our faces so similar. Due to the constant changes in our life of late, which people continue to refer to as a series of deaths, I am much more active and getting a lot more exercise. The illusion of death dominates people's views of her reality and causes them to claim it dictates her reality in some way. She feels pressure to adopt their perceptions. I unwind my branches, which are woodier when I am stronger and which I braid into semblances of human limbs. I lift my upper branches. The stained-glass pieces bend their metal joints to reach for me. My invisible center and their colored light meld into a cloud that witnesses to ages and ages of life. Prismatic. It is the story that does not end.

When next I look to her, she is climbing out from under all that had crumbled on top of her at today's church visioning retreat—the second and final day, which marks the end to the nine-month visioning process led by our interim pastor. She breathes smoothly through her parted lips, but her cheeks are flushed, and her snuffling and honking indicate her nose still feels fat. She needs air. I push out into the copper afternoon. The broad, sandstone face of the church rises like a cliff to catch and warm the last of the sun's light. The stacked rocks come to a peak in the center. Two narrow, vertical stretches of stained glass divide the frontispiece into three sections. Over either set of double-doors, tableaux of worshippers with three-dimensional heads, worn down to their gaping skulls, are painted in the bold rainbow colors that drive her to use those vibrant Genesis paints when making real-life scenes of the building. The cornerstone reads "1957," but this denotes the facelift completed by Harry Ollrogge to the original Lannon stone-clad Gothic Revival structure of 1935 by Hugo Haeuser. The modernization marks the merger of two local congregations of the same denomination, one of which started meeting together as early as the 1920s. Currently, the oldest member, Reuel, was born into that elder church, and he remembers well the architectural redesign process. He had been about her age then. He says they intended the front to look like a beacon to the neighborhood.

The church is a joint congregation, but now, the two bodies are the previously merged remnant, plus another local church of a different denomination. It has been explained to us numerous times (and always with the same choice word) that Sherman Park used to be an "affluent" neighborhood and that the church reflects that. Since then, the two churches were forced, individually, to recognize and admit decline. In an effort to elongate the lives of both congregations, they found enough commonality to negotiate unity. Doing so bought them sixteen more years and delayed what we are facing at this weekend's conference. Still, here we are.

She appears beside me on the front steps. The busy traffic on Sherman whizzes past, moving the debris down the sidewalk, landing it up against the stairs, or snagging it in the raised flowerbeds. The air is full of *shh*. The wind passes easily through my green limbs, but roughly through the drying leaves on tree branches up and down the boulevard. Her dark hair windmills around her face, and she tucks it in futility behind her ears a couple times. We cross the street in two stages, waiting on the grassy median for a second break in traffic caused solely by red lights. We head away from the park, which is a few blocks south of the church. On the sidewalks, her feet disappear in pools of yellow and orange leaves, and her shuffles are *sh, sh, sh, sh*.

It is the church's second autumn without a full-time pastor. Our second autumn with this church. She likes to joke that the pastor left in February because she started attending in December. After months of visiting churches that she found online, since no one ever invited her to church, we happened upon this one on a walk. We were beginning to wonder when and where we would find our next church-family—a relationship that has never been so difficult to graft. Before arriving in Milwaukee two summers ago, she had anticipated that the task would be a cinch in the Midwest. But so far, I see many Milwaukeeans struggle with being human in that way. With that capacity. To this day, no one in this church or in this city has invited her into a home for social or personal, let alone spiritual, reasons. They seem to be satisfied with those who are already in their lives and uninterested in cultivating any new relationships.

The *sukkot* were erected this past week in the back and side yards of our Orthodox neighbors. Such a difficult tension for humans to celebrate. The joy for the harvest—for God's bountiful provisions through the investment of their labors—is prominent in the dried squash and corn, the fruit, the fragrant plants, and the children's artwork that families have used to decorate their tiny booths. The families cluster into tight cornucopias to break bread together. This late afternoon, instead of the loose, sparse *sekhakh* opening to early stars above their heads, we all receive an autumn mist upon our heads. Their sons have apples in their cheeks, and their daughters, pearls in their hair. Their fathers, and some of their mothers, will take up their *lulav* sets of palm, willow, and myrtle branches in their dominant hands, with the palm spines facing them and their voices facing east, and say, "Blessed are You, *Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam*, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding the *lulav*." Following this, they will take up the *etrogim* in their other hands, saying, "Blessed are You, *Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam*, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion." They will bring the top of the *etrog* against the bottom of the *lulav* and cover it over with their fingers. They will wave the *arba minim* thrice south, north, east, upward, downward, and west, bringing the Four Kinds back to the chest, over the heart each time.

We stall on the sidewalk, staring, imagining the ancient Israelites, who also left the places of their births and upbringings, where they were also born and raised into their faith heritage. They went to places where they could observe *mitzvot* as it had been revealed to their ancestors. Such thankfulness for God bringing them through and providing.

Days like these, these holy days, they were made for such as me. Whether feast or fast, they nourish me. I begin blazing, but not burning. My branches rise erect. I stretch to twice her height in a moment. She will not blame me. She used to think my doing this was embarrassing, because, for her, blushing is the most embarrassing part of an embarrassing situation. A betrayal of

exposed vulnerability. A public admission that you find something or someone moving. That you are inspired. She puts the back of her hand against her back, which must be warming. I retreat a few paces, but I do not yet die down. I take advantage of how much she is letting us enjoy this. Without shame. With pride. So freely. I undulate.

Yet at such times, our community members, she, and I reflect also on exile and wandering and temporary dwelling. The Israelites waited in the wilderness for an entire generation to depart from them, a generation to have received the seed of a promise and to have lost its harvest. This can be or become the work of a Faith: to know what has been promised and to believe it will be fulfilled, even if at a distance; to instruct in preparation for the fulfillment and to value, above all, the preparedness of the people for when the fulfillment is ripe; to trust one's part is successful, regardless of the outcome; to bless those who are to follow, and to be made perfect through those who do follow; to be blessed by the unity of the faithful over all the years under the promise, and by the faithfulness of the promiser to look forward. I watch in anticipation and assurance for the newly visible to cross from the invisible. When these shifts occur, they are slight. So much so that I can sometimes fail to notice. Plus, they are many and everywhere. Unpredictable and unimaginable. But they make all the difference in this world to those who consider themselves the sighted.

I turn back to the church and the work that has been ours to do last night and today. I can only ever be what she allows me to be, but she has allowed me what I needed to get her through what remains. A Faith does not have to deal with doubt as a human does but does have to deal with the human's doubt and its impacts on oneself. I must be the power that surges up within her, yet she affects how mighty I am when I arise. Wisdom attracts her to what nurtures me and comforts her with my ability to uphold and restore her, in turn, when the times come. Every time I learn, every time she allows me access to Wisdom, I grow and strengthen in understanding and become more useful to her.

The church's visioning retreat is a culmination of: all the interim pastor, who specializes in helping churches become sensitive again to their identities and callings, has taught us about being a church in the 21st century; all our Transition Team has researched and learned about who we are, who our neighbors are, and what our community's current needs are; and, all the votes at the very end of this last day, when the majority of what is left of the congregation will determine which of three viable options to recommend to the church council. Whereas the Transition Team proposed three options, representing the desires of the congregation, the interim pastor has been preparing everyone all along to accept just the one, representing how unidirectionally and forcefully the wind is blowing through this church and out the door.

Pastor refers to holy closure as "passing the baton," which involves "sharing our resources with the larger Church, and spreading our congregants out among other congregations." To introduce this analogy, she used the Children's Time during one worship service months ago, which was particularly opportune for having children and for not undergoing another impromptu, mid-service cancellation due to being fresh out. Since the children are oftentimes not of speaking age, only one or two in number, and filled out by parents and adolescent nursery volunteers, Children's Time tends to be more successful as a production before the more attentive and appreciative adults in the pews. Pastor is miked, even though the children are so close to her that

she may manipulate their bodies with her hands. On this occasion, she lined them up equidistant from each other and gave the last one in line a rolled piece of paper, taped tight. She showed them how the next runner in a relay race would wait, poised: eyes forward, one knee bent, one hand reaching backward. But what if, when a runner has run his/her portion, no one is there to take the baton?

Today, I looked around the room and saw my girl was the only person whom I would qualify as “young” at the retreat, despite her not feeling that way right now. I would argue she feels more tired than anyone else there, because she still has probably the farthest race left to run. That is a much different weariness than having reached the end of one’s marathon, and a point at which I am pressured instead of commended. In her eyes, it looks all the time more like I have lost some well-laid and -lined track and will require her to venture off cross-country. After almost 20 years of my being in her life, she still often goes with Emotion, which has always been with her, will always be with her, has known her longer, and has deceived her many a time into thinking it seeks her best interests. I cannot deceive, a type which humans avoid and consider unemotional—or, otherwise, one who does not take others’ emotions into consideration. She never threatens to give up her Emotion, and no one ever threatens to separate her from her Emotion. Quite the opposite, most urge her to be guided by her Emotion. It is a withering experience for me. But when it comes down to it, only her Love and I, which have been secured if not born with her, are the parts of herself for whose sake she has felt she would die. She has whispered this to me. Knowing how she envisions death, I say no more. I am honored. It is enough. I owe this to Love, without which I can do nothing. It is Love and I that join together to protect and fortify her. One of us will die for her, and one of us has done so already.

Upon our arrival at the conference last night, she chose to sit at Reuel’s table. People teased them for being the oldest and youngest together. Pastor assigned 1 Samuel 3 to our table for our study-passage at the outset of the conference. Samuel kept thinking Eli was calling for him in the night, since God had not yet ever spoken to him. Finally, the blind, old man tells Samuel that the next time he hears his name called, he should respond, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”

Today, everyone was facing three partition boards, each one displaying one of the three viable options left to the church. To vote, each person was given one Post-It Note. Pastor warned that they were not only voting for the option that spoke most clearly to them personally, but also the option that they felt willing and able to undertake. Thus, no one should vote for an option that s/he wanted someone else to undertake on the group’s behalf. That left everyone as undertakers, no matter what they chose. Pastor commanded they pay no mind to where others were posting their sticky, colored squares. Mostly, the group was divided between staying in our current building, which had motivated all their decisions in the past, and starting in a new building, which felt to many like a complete erasure of our identity. The people surmised that with either of those options, they would at least be together. Pastor criticized this as a reprehensible reason to be a church-family and to select a church-home. They should go to the places they had been called.

The last at the boards was Reuel, curved over his walker with his Post-It Note stuck to the handlebar. 94 years he has done the work of the body, building and building. He started in front of the “Pass the Baton” board and lingered there. Then, he made his way up and down the gallery

of Scripture passages, visual aids of the Transition Team’s findings, our conference discussion notes on what would be lost, gained, and required under each option. Back and forth he went, over all these considerations. The only sound in the room was the *sh, sh, sh* from his soft-soled shoes and an occasional cough from someone acting as if everyone were not busy watching. The ache started in her ears, and she clenched her jaws against it. He kept stopping in front of “Pass the Baton.” He looked at it the way people tend to look at a crucifix before they are ready to confess. One sagging cheek rested on his stiff shirt collar. He peered askew at the words from under his droopy lids. She whispered, “Just do it. You know you want to. Go ahead, and set the baton down, Reuel. On the ground.” A council elder at the table *shh*’d her. Reuel finally did, though. He pressed his Post-It Note against the board with his fingertips and then ran one shaky finger along the adhesive edge, from one side to the other, to seal it. That’s when she lost the last of her composure. It can be like I’m not there at all. She never considers what I think she does that embarrasses us. This would not encourage any Faith. Hers or anyone else’s.

People often want to get away from their Faiths. Imagine how Faiths feel at times. What have we ever done wrong? Come; let us reason together. Humans’ legacy? Brought sin into the world. Faiths’ legacy? Everything that does not come from us is sin. Despite common misconception, I can get plenty hot.

Beth Jehudah in Sherman Park was founded in 1939 by the late Rabbi Jacob Twerski. When the congregation was down to a remnant of 35 families, his son Michael, of that Hasidic rabbinic dynasty, said, “I have an aversion to presiding over a moribund community. It’s very frustrating not to be able to build.” Springing from vision and campaigns between 1989 and 2003, we now have a *yeshiva*-preparatory day school, girls’ high school, *kollel* with adult Jewish studies, renovated synagogue, kosher grocery store, kosher café, and almost 150 Orthodox families, many of whom have become *ba’alei teshuva*. When asked to explain the phenomena, Twerski said, “What kept us afloat was barely concealed miracles from the Almighty. We saw the splitting of the sea many times over.”

She follows me back down into the undercroft of the church building. Everyone is working on the second vote, and there’s Reuel, floating around his decision to pass the baton, which he does make again. The room waits on her, but she is once more in tears and wants not to participate in this round. She must act, though, and in accord with me, for me to have any value or make any difference. I insist she rise, take her Post-It Note from Pastor’s fingertips, stride to the “Pass the Baton” board, and stick the square atop Reuel’s as a sign of solidarity. She sickens again to think of the great gap between Reuel and herself in how far she must run to get to where he is, and that she will have to keep running past that point and into forever with a baton for no one to receive. It takes three more votes before the group is unified. They must first realize that dissolution does not mean they have no more life or vocation; rather, it means they have become seeds again. What has made them so weary for so long is the stagnation—the interpretation of their position as a burial instead of a planting. But all these booths are temporary. All of them. Hence, Faith.

The rest is pride and envy. Attempts to prove with numbers the Spirit’s presence and activity. Just like King David and J. Waskom Pickett, they call for a census to be taken, as if the size of Faith responded to that of the body, and its might correlated to appearance. The unseen is far more powerful than the seen. Forget how things look! I am of and from Spirit. Potency

immeasurable. Diminishing has no equivalency to “dying,” and what may be perceived as a negligible number is not equivalent to “dead.” My efficacy has no basis in quantitative measurement or statistical evidence. I am not a countable noun. I am a fullness of another, from another. Established and firm. My strength is grounded in another. All my needs are provided by another. What have I to do with worry? Worry is knowing you will want to say “no” to what is asked of you. Worry is knowing you would want to say “yes” to what will never be asked of you.

It is not our job to build the Church; it is our job to be the Church. But each church is not necessarily designed to be large, or prominent, or propertied, or stable, or even permanent. These are not inherent goods to be blindly desired. A church’s pragmatic perception of its self, mission, or value in the last century fixes its gaze on the cares and concerns of the world, instead of what Love wills and where Faiths lead. The Church continues in the Way, regardless of what happens to churches along the way. If we were dependent on the latter, then we would be dead.

She experiences me, even more than she expresses me. It has nothing to do with whether she is weak or unsound. It has everything to do with whether I am. She cares for me so that when she needs care, I can support her. She and I stay after the disbanding of the conference and will stay through the disbanding of the church. I have her hug everyone who lingers, whether they seem at peace or not. She stands next to Reuel, who eventually rises to leave, when a woman approaches him, slips her arm under his, and says, “Four words come to mind when I look at you: good and faithful servant.” He bows his head. My girl looks away—a damming tactic.

As she and I walk back to her bungalow, she keeps flexing her hands and examining both sides of them. I take one to hold as we push against the opposing traffic of long black trench coats and heavy winter hats. We often exchange places with our Orthodox neighbors. She rakes on Saturday while they walk about the community. They rake on Sunday while we walk to and from church. The world teaches that faith cultures should not muddle. (As if it could be prevented.) That is why it is special and miraculous in the moments when humans openly and intentionally recognize their doing so, showing how beautiful Faiths can be when liberated to do what they do best and not constrained and made to listen to the world. Communing with a reformational rabbi. Communing over foods developed in what seems like new worlds. And some Presby-Lutherans communing over the remembrance of a life given and kept, a temple destroyed and raised again. None of us may stay as we are. Every moment, the Body taking the bread and cup along with her, the world over, is different and shifting. Each moment, it is not made up of the same bodies. Breath enters and exits. But knowing all of them, all the kinds, are about the same activity draws them close, over her heart, each time. Makes part of her leave here and go to where they are to be among them. And if we were to go, they would prepare a place for us to be with them. If it were not so, I would tell her.

And yet, despite this, tomorrow, she will not want to worship. Already, she does not want to go to the service. Pastor mentioned today that she understood if those who attended the retreat on Friday and Saturday decided not to come on Sunday morning. My girl mourns losses that feel like loss to her. She feels discontent and defeat, even if they are misperceptions working against her. But she has the overwhelming sense that she should be doing what I do, and that I will have us walking that path one more time this weekend. To restrain me from worship is to watch me diminish. Instantly, she goes from fearing I am bossy to fearing I am frail. Of course, I am

neither, and so, she will follow me in the new morning. And she will see again how talking about me with others makes her more aware of every good thing she has in Christ. Without end.

All Souls' Day (Day of the Dead)
Tuesday, 01 November 2002
Skagway, Alaska 99840

People fantasize about the people they want in their lives versus the people they have in their lives. They fantasize because those were the people they once were. Or because they are never going to be people like those. Or because they are never going to be someone in particular. They do the same thing with their Faiths. Some even develop Faith envy.

She and I have been working with each other now for five years, soon to be six. In that brief time, she has changed from a child to an adult. It is as if she is remade each and every year into a different person. Whereas I seem to be her opposite in that capacity. I am more like one of her stuffed animals that she throws when angry, squeezes when sad, tosses up in the air and catches when happy, whispers to and makes dance when lonely, or just shelves. She does not believe I am real, but she likes to imagine I am, that I can serve her in some way, and that she decides when and how. She wants me to come alive magically in her imagination and then lie dormant through her daily activities. I grow so slowly that she witnesses no change in me, rather that I am static and soft. Blinkless and glassy-eyed. Something you set out to please someone who is not there but who you believe will be.

Her mother has not been any help to me, which I deduce is due to the loss of her husband, the girl's father, not long before my arrival. It was like she was raising just the girl, and not me as well and not with me. She isn't really sure where I came from or what I am doing here; I am suspect. She was so careful and intentional in providing for the girl's physical, emotional, and mental needs, but she was completely neglectful to any spiritual nurturing. She had her exercise her body, her mind, her emotional expressions and experiences. But she did not realize her spiritual needs, and I am the flab to prove it.

The girl's experience of me is as a hindrance, instead of the means for her to know and heed the inspiration that has imparted her with life. So, it is only when it is convenient and agreeable to her that I can get her to express me. Or when she thinks it is coming from her natural self and does not realize I am motivating her. These are not the right words; I must work off mainly instinct. I feel the emptiness in my mouth. I am so hungry to be fed.

Against my advice, which I could not support and which she did not request in the first place, this fall, she opted to: start at an enormous research university far from any family; travel there alone; not claim her major (which I am confident should be painting); not build around herself a support network from a church or campus organization; and, socialize and work instead of study and go to class. None of these were the right choices for her. None of these were her very best, for which she is intended. I am failing her. She will not feel the consequences as negative. Or even correlated. She cares only for increasing her independence, while I am supposed to be guiding her into the recognition and celebration of being fully dependent. I am getting us

nowhere. And these are just her first decisions as an adult stepping out into the world. Where will she take us from here?

Her mother called mid-term to tell her we lost Grama, her only remaining grandparent. All her grandparents have been blessings to me. Since I came because of what my girl had heard, they are a large reason of what I am doing with their granddaughter. Contact with them is always a good thing, and the occasions have become increasingly rare with their departures. Normally, with all these setbacks, that is exactly whom I would have had her call, had she asked me. I wish *I* could call them for myself! But her mother's mother was her sagest grandparent and my greatest loss so far in my life.

Grama arrived anywhere with all the boldness of her Viking heritage, coming into a place with eyes keen to what good there was to be had. She was the first to teach my girl how to paint, long before I came on scene. And she taught her how travel expands your canvases to spaces you cannot imagine, broadens your heart to encompass a larger and larger world as yours, and allows your viewers to come with you every step of the way. Whenever she had her granddaughter in tow, they would stretch open their easels or sketchbooks and loot all their eyes could see and their hands could handle. Pastels and acrylics while they were on the take; then, unloading the hoard in Grama's atelier, they captured light on the lilt of their oils. In all the years of instructing her granddaughter, she never, ever touched her granddaughter's pieces. When the girl lacked a brush technique or a blending or layering effect, they would sit side-by-side, and she would demonstrate on her canvas (equally off-limits to her granddaughter) while the girl practiced replicating on her own canvas, even if it meant Grama had to guide her through a subject of the granddaughter's interest alone and lose light-hours for her own studies. In the last few years, the girl would find her with both of Papa's clamp lights clipped on either side of her table-top station, her nose so close to the canvas one would be tempted to think she was experimenting with facial application, and her brush tip highlighting a roof line lying several centimeters away—a pale ghost hovering in the sky. Her macular degeneration had her family members holding their fingers over lines on which she needed to target signing from muscle memory. She would ask her granddaughter how her progress on her painting was looking, but it was a question of hope that her eyes were deceiving her. She knew, so her granddaughter did not lie. The girl confirmed what Grama was able to see still for herself. Her final piece had been intended for her church in memory of Papa, and she was furious with herself for not finishing, or for not being able to finish. The body betrays. Grama would look at her Faith and ask what it would mean now for her to finish well. That Faith was more beautiful than any glistening portrait ever produced; how my girl cannot long to set me in the same light, I do not understand. Grandmother and granddaughter discussed the possibility of the girl finishing the painting for Grama, but they knew that would be sacrilege.

For their final raid together this summer, after my girl's high school graduation and before the start of her first college semester, Grama said her ultimate campaign ambition at that point would be to invade Alaska, and she arranged for them to seize a chance at the retreating glaciers, which people on the trip called either "dead" or "dying." They took two tandem-guided tours: reclining on dogsleds in the accumulation zone of a glacier, and then in kayaks in the glacial lake. The snow that had fallen at the heights of the glacier and become part of the mass was so compacted in such a slow-moving body that it had not seen light for two hundred years by the time it

reached the terminus. There, a great crack percusses across the bay and up the ravine, and a sheet of ice drops with a sliding *sh!* and a smacking boom into the water. Ancient snow laid bare to brilliant sunlight from above and the darkness at its feet, into which it will drop at any moment. The new berg recovers its submersion and floats lightly away, with no weight at all. There was something very generational in the phenomenon to me. In that, I am not alone; people call it “calving.” And yet, this entire experience with her grandmother cannot be replicated; no granddaughter of her own could share this with her when her turn comes.

Two weeks ago, her grandmother’s spirit pulsed as a wave out of her body. I keep picturing that chunk of ice dropping into the meltwater. That is how it feels to her to lose her last grandparent—an entire generation of her family. Exposure. They were the barrier facing the expanse, the bulwark pushing into the open. And at the memorial service, her mother and aunt, as they stepped up to the podium to speak, did look like newborns raised to tall heights and knocked with bright lights. Grama’s generation was the last in this nation to be raised so predominantly in the Church, the last to experience such an overlap between the cultures of Christianity and what so many people identify as the dominant national culture. Even as I celebrate what I know to be the great joy, peace, and victory for her grandmother, and even as I revel in the flight of Grama’s Faith with her spirit, so much like my all-too-recent flight with the Spirit along the cliffs to my girl, the loss of that era of saints worries the girl for the support of me. When she is especially nervous about it, she teases, “After all, I have a Faith to feed!” Yet she has fewer and fewer people to help her care for me. Fewer and fewer people for whom she may help care by sharing about me. Faiths fellowship. We feed each other. She does not know whom she can trust for advice full of the Spirit’s wisdom and Scriptural insight. A diminishing number recognize the value. So, she cannot complain openly or expect compassion. It’s not a loss to most. It’s not even a real thing.

Even Grama had no compassion on the girl’s mother when Mom complained that there was no one to help her care for her child. Grama said that is what she should expect, when she kept moving so far away from her family. The distances between us are increasing. It is a fact of my life here.

In Grama’s studio, while her mother and aunt sorted and settled Papa and Grama’s household, she painted Grama’s urn with a Viking ship on a Nordic sea of icebergs in the deep of night. She wanted it to seem unclear whether the sky was full of stars or snowflakes. As if she had not realized it, her family pointed out that the urn would soon be empty. She suspected they would prefer she spend her time helping them process a traveler’s lifetime accumulation. Her parents taught her how to work and take life seriously. Her grandparents taught her how to play and not take life so seriously. She said to the women, “My dear Marthas, all art is temporary. All of it. We must, then, make art a voyage. Nothing more.” I was startled that she sounded like me and wondered whether I had put this in her head.

I could have predicted, when she received the news that meant this world, for her, would no longer contain a grandparent’s home to visit, that she would subsequently drop her courses, determining they were “stupid and pointless.” Of course, then, she could not remain in the dormitories—pragmatism that she said was “totally stressing [her] out.” She cannot turn to me

when she is distressed, because she does not turn to me when she is not. I do tend to sit there dumbly, staring at her, not sure what to think or say. Unprepared. Resourceless.

She did not agree with her mother and aunt's choice of landscape to make her grandmother's cremains a part. She pictured her grandmother as composing the terrain around the Alaskan town that Grama and she favored best from those they visited, and she envisions scattering the cremains there like the ritual of mixing one's own paint. At this juncture, I am speechless. She stole the ashes from the urn, replacing them with a Ziploc bag of chimney soot from Grama's fireplace, and put the ashes in an urn that can pass through airport security. She has used the rest of her money for college on coming here. Her mother imagines her back at school and even drove her to the airport and gave her big hugs of support for her journey. Sometimes, I'm not sure it makes any difference that I go with her. Can she tell? Can I? What does it mean, if it does not matter that I am there? This whole experience has made me wonder if that is where we really are, and no farther. Are all Faiths more important to God than to their humans? Like her, I am adding to the list of questions I wish we had taken the time to ask her grandparents. Now, our whole lives, we can never get their perspectives on these matters. These may prove to be our greatest lost opportunities that we ever experience.

This morning, dawn sat like a wedding band around the horizon's girth—three stacked rings of pink, yellow, and white gold. We have waited until 0830 for the sun and its pair of sundogs to crest the distant foothills. She whispers "all right" to see them mush. In the softened 42° Fahrenheit air, she shoulders the ashes, and the three of us head out of town along Klondike Highway, as if we were going to undertake The Golden Circle route once more. The low scrub looks like a silver mist around the base of the evergreen spires, which lose their green and appear black in all the blinding white and muting grays of sky, cloud, stone, branch, snow, and icy water. The farther the sun travels, the more color returns. The wide heavens are so blue and clear that she claims she can draw their entirety into her lungs in one long breath. When we are far enough out that she senses we are beyond the territory of the thousand or so residents, and before the territory of the camping grounds, she wanders off the road into the 8-inch drifts. A gentle snowscape. Even dewy today. She tells me that, within weeks, it will be entirely different, as at the end of a grace period. How have these immortals developed such a fractured understanding of everything? They even devised time to create spatial compartments and relationships.

She looks about and sees nowhere that feels comfortable to her for casting the ashes upon the ground—not atop the snow, and not along the patches of mud. Now she wishes she had planned a windy mountaintop release. She tests the ground and discovers she can dig down a few inches with her trowel. When she has unearthed a sufficient grave, she pours in the cremains. They lay light and loose upon the dark muck bed in the weak Northern light. When she covers them, she feels like she is smothering someone, and she almost gags when she strikes the mild mound with the back of the blade to pack the earth. The worst, though, is when she must leave them there, in the ground, under the open sky, among the wild animals. For people, that is the part that feels wrong, unnatural to the process. That is when they start telling themselves: *That is not them, and they are not there anymore.* It is the only way she can get herself to leave.

The place is there now. From now on. She has made of it a place. Even if she can never place it again. The world and the heavens never feel more vast to her than when she tries to picture any

one of her grandparents' graves. This is the second way they must entrust their departed ones to God's eyes and arms. *See us in the dark; lift us up from the depths*, they pray. This is when she begins to cry: the time she turns around again to pinpoint where the grave is, to reassure herself that she may find it and return to it, to realize it has blended into the landscape, and to believe she has lost in that moment what seems to her like her grandmother. I ask her, *Is this really where you would have her be?* But this only makes her regret the empty urn, that she has not kept her grandmother right there, with her, at her side. I put a limb around her shoulders to turn her from this place.

We walk back to town. She trails behind me; I try to recall if this is the first time. A snow flurry winds down the day. I let her sleep in the motel, and then, I lead her to today's candle-lighting ritual in a local church. As we take seats in the sanctuary, my limbs wear a mantle of snow that will soon dew. She looks to me, but I do not turn to her. I remain attentive to the attendant at the lectern, who is reading the passage in Hebrews that journeys through walks of faith of ancients. She goes forward, stepping to the litany of By Faith statements of others who have gone before us. She lights a candle for Grama.

She turns back to the pew and sees that I have become dim, watching her sorrow. The stained-glass saints descend to encircle and console me. She must sit at the other end of the pew. The figures around me radiate in listening to the tales of living Faiths. She suddenly notices that not one of those who surround me—not one of the most popular personae depicted in church windows—represents one of the people cataloged in the Faith chapter. There are too many Faiths to be recognized; she feels how hers (how I) will be one of the obscure and how she is part of the small acknowledgement of the Faiths of her grandparents. But the Faith chapter starts with one, just the one, the only one, Abel, to have tasted what his parents had been warned would fill their mouths should they take into themselves the need to choose good or evil, the need to see what the human eye cannot discern for them. The first to experience what humans know as the physical death; the first Faith to take its last steps to deliverance and to be needed no more. She is struck by the thought of what Abel's family decided to do with his body. What they made of it at all. Lifeless. Did they have the same expectation of his immanent return? Did they inquire to God what was right?

That Jesus should return after he had died, along with a number of other people on that occasion, is one of the simplest concepts for people to accept. That he, his prophets, and his disciples raised people from the dead. That he will come again. That they will see their loved ones again. All to be expected. But why he had to die in the first place, why any of them had to die? For those conversations, she really starts to lean on me for what she is supposed to say to people. It should not be easy; it is not meant to be. Separation is a loss, and it does cause pain. To any being. There, the answer lies.

For this day, just as she is sending off her grandmother in this frozen clime, many in the Southern Hemisphere are anticipating the visitations of their *angelitos* and then, tomorrow, the adult spirits of their families. Even though, tomorrow afternoon, their celebrations will culminate in a trip to the cemetery—for to the graves we all must go, if the festivities they prepared for their relatives' enjoyment do indeed make them happy spirits, then celebrants may receive the wisdom and protection they seek. People enjoy granting the omniscient eye to the departed,

imagining them looking down on us at all our most glorious moments. Thus, they will send our way all that someone who loves us would want us to have. It is easier for people to imagine their grandmothers paying attention to them and having compassion on them than God, who would not allow for death, if Love.

People gladly take the gifts they are given. They resentfully give what is taken, losing all gratitude and delight that they had these gifts in their lives and that their lives are forever blessed for it. Forever. The gifts can never actually be removed from them; they will always have had them and be changed for it. To quell their revolt, though, one must reassure them that they will be given them again and, then, forevermore and perfected. But at the end of each day, they don't believe they are going anywhere the next that they do not intend. They don't believe in their own deaths. If only they could apply this vision of themselves to everyone else. Then, they'd start to get the picture of what Faiths have seen. They are all forevermore. They are all life. Love perseveres. It is as they desire. Love endures all things. When they see for themselves, not one bit of them thinks to look back.

She hopes God has prepared a place for her grandmother that is not a gated community, through the bars of which her new sight is straining toward what is now behind her. She hopes her grandmother's only lingering investment in her is Love, that her grandmother need not know about one further moment she must endure, that Life has taken on a completely different meaning, and that she will be able to fill her in on the few highlights there will be, by God's grace, when we arrive where she is, if any of this still matters at that point. The short sentence of our entire walk. By Faith, she will grow, wherever planted. After all, even these beings, who assign a start and a stop to everything, know that paintings are both *in media res* and pauses, if one can get them to hold still.

I put into her mind that God takes care of her grandparents. Every day. No change from any other days of their lives. No difference from what is true for her. Her gaze wanders over my way.

I smile at her from where I sit beside the painted-glass effigy of Peter with his giant keys. (May we neither live nor die by the keys. I will have to tell that to her later to get her to smile. Maybe I will inspire a painting. I would like that.) Even though it is impossible for her that I should ask her to leave, it will soon be time to go. She has come to believe the safest places in the world are those that are far from and strange to the place where she is expected, but that have called up in her what she imagines to be the feelings of "home." She is examining me and wondering, *Have I done enough to prepare her to go back out there, under these conditions? Is she strong enough to get done what is ours to do, to make it to the end, to carry us home?* I am asking myself the same thing of her. This may be a start for us. Distrust has been known to ask for progress. To hope. What is seen as bad can be made good. Hence, Hope.

The reading ends. The candles flicker in the stillness. The stained-glass saints glimmer their ways back to their frames. Grama is housed in starlight. When she envies, she envies those who have finished struggling and attained peace. When she fears, she fears I have failed, though I am not the one of us with that capacity. I pray, and she bows her head and closes her eyes. I pray to depend on the lights of our path to illumine our way to God, for God's way to be revealed right

before us, at our very feet, where it has been all along. I tap her shoulder and step out into and down the aisle. This time, I know she will follow.

Ash Wednesday

18 February 2015

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Shorewood, WI 53201

Faith can and does make cultures. Just as much as any other feature by which a person gets categorized. Just as much as any other connective bond that draws a group together. Both one's Faith and one's cultures are gifts. People refer to them as possessions—as belonging to “us” or “them.” Her Education, yet another part of her that I must monitor to ensure she puts it to good use and does not get carried away by it, would like to teach her that cultures make faiths. In this world of demarcations, people can point to these—cultures and faiths, outside of themselves, and then point to where these should exist, away from them. Even when she first started school at five years old, the time of “Show me yours, and I'll show you mine,” she could sense her family's faith heritage and covenantal relationship were not something of hers that others would ask her to share with them. She could have predicted how many in her life would tell her that they appreciate this about her—when she *doesn't* share me, when she keeps me all to herself. This is the situation, a *lack* of exchange, in which she receives thanks.

Much to her bafflement, since she admires me as her greatest treasure. She marvels that I could also be the bane of her identity. This is especially problematic, because I am what makes all of her make sense; no one can fully understand her unless they get to know me as well. When she wonders whether people are certain they are not curious to have a peek at me, they are certain they already know all about me and exactly what I am like. Of course, we are indivisible. I am always with her, whether or not she hides me away, and that is all the more anyone cares to know. (*What's good for me is good for me*, etc.) People have no idea that any of the ways she produces [Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control] for them is attributable to me. I am the harmless one here, the one who continues any of her growth in grace. Nevertheless, her acclaim for my good nature provokes discomfort, anxiety, restlessness—wincing side glances. *Keep it out of sight! Don't look directly at it!* Knowing she brings me into the vicinity makes people want her gone from among them. Perhaps that's attributable to my own plurality; I never come alone. Grama called such a conundrum “guilty by association.” Or perhaps it's because so much that comes from her does not come from me, all that is her Sin, but since I am central to her, that is attributed to me as well. It dis-graces all I bring with me. To settle those who are uncomfortable around me, she must set herself apart. Not that she has not had plenty of forewarning about this. Even as a child, she mourned the life of her Faith. I can be such a regrettable necessity.

She attended kindergarten with Indian children living in Yanbu by the Red Sea, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Her family was relegated to a community of “Westerners,” which is to say all the people believed to belong to or to be heavily influenced by the “Christian” faith or culture, clustered like a tumor on the outskirts of the city, pushing into the open desert. According to her father, this made their only neighbors the barrels of nuclear waste buried under the sand dunes out there. They were segregated because of what they were assumed to share. Through difficult

language exchanges, the families managed to celebrate communally one thing humans do share. Once a month, any camp-member with a birthday in that month was recognized by one big pot luck party. Each adult in the community contributed something from his/her family's heritage, which was determined by one's last name at birth. When she was turning six, her mother with a German maiden name was assigned beer, which was made in their bathtub, much to her father's delight. From a man with an Italian name, wine was expected, and much to the girl's delight, she was selected to stomp the grapes underfoot to the beat of a baritone's serenade while the sky bled purple, as if by her influence.

She removed her shoes and socks in front of her classmates after that for show-and-tell, and she brought the Betamax copy of *The Last Unicorn* that she had received as a gift. These, they admired; they were fascinated by them. *Let's have a look! Let me see; let me see!*

At that time in her life, in that bedroom, her father tucked her in at night, read to her from ancient texts written in those lands, and taught her how to pray to the God for all those generations. She would drag a dining-room or desk chair from somewhere in the house next to her bed and turn it to face her in the bed. Or she might kneel on the floor with her head resting on the lap of the chair. If her father tried to sit there, mistaking her intention, she would squeal that he was sitting on Jesus. Her favorite name for God has always been Immanuel. Often, she would fall asleep with her arm extended over the edge of the bed, her hand just shy of the seat. It was in this attitude that she received me seven years later. God set me in her grasp. I tickled her palm to wake her with what were only my soft, pale fronds then. She tried to brush the debris from her hand, but I was solid, weighty, resistant. I clung.

Yet, I am not like a climber or creeper, nor a spreader or ground-coverer. I am like a fruit tree. I catch her taking long, hard looks at me. She thinks I am fierce and confident in a way she could never be. She has learned that I stem from a source strength, which then courses through her, becoming useful and complete. But she pictures it as a process of dilution, and that I am stronger than she; that's an understanding-in-progress. When she was first presented with me, she followed me around all day, because she was curious to watch my strange decisions and alien activities in the world. Eventually, she realized she was compelled to do the same—to overcome and make new what others say dominates her. This is how she knows I am first in her life: in the Way, she is glaringly counter-cultural, and her image is as bad as a prophet's.

Sure, she can abandon me, but she can never disown me. I would never think to do either to her. Even as I struggle with the world and long for home, it's impossible for me to consider returning without her. I cannot "get lost." She cannot lose me. No matter how much she might wish it (even pray for it right in front of me) at times, when I feel to her like more than she can take. Because she didn't find me. And because she is the only reason I exist. To work in her. To bring her to completion. There is nowhere else for me to go.

Security is social and comes from a commitment to society—relationship building, resource sharing, collaborative planning. We depend on communities of mutual care and obligations, including her communion with me, those with whom I tabernacle, and those with whom I draw her into relationship. When she was living with her mother as a child, they did not join any churches in the congregants' worship or rituals or service, and I remained weak, though attracted

to strong Faiths when I encountered them. Strong Faiths do not judge or dispute with weaker Faiths, and weak Faiths do not condemn or reject stronger Faiths. A Faith does not begrudge a Faith. They are grateful for each other, and gratitude leads only to joy. They are gracious to each other, and grace leads only to peace. Even though I have never settled us since she has been an adult, since that would not be in service to the Will for her life's preparations, I do invest us in local churches as one part of what is necessary for me to grow. I have matured to the point where I can prove our steadfastness, when people look down on my existence, and not draw back in the face of suffering. I am strong enough to afford her the choice of mistreatment from prejudice over betrayal of Love. I am strong enough to reassure her whenever she opts to listen to my voice and to follow where it leads, even though it is only one among the many that speak to her all at once in every moment and offer to guide her. It is a matter of having a special person in your life: you glory in their presence; you feel devoted to them, are proud to stand up for them in public, and delight in listening to other people praise them; you love to bring them pleasure and hate to hurt them or their reputation; you long to share your day with them at its close and discover that's the best part of your day. That's the innocence she and I have been able to achieve with her Love. Some will elect to be offended by our union, but my job is to remind her of how the heart of her first Love will feel. Because of me, she must remember she is never alone. Even when someone wants her to feel she is. I brought communion into her life, and she will have that forever, long after I am no longer a part of it.

I have long intended for her to go to graduate school for her painting, which she began studying at four under her grandmother's tutelage. It is the fourth week of her second semester toward earning her M.F.A. in Studio Art, with a specialization in Painting & Drawing. She had imagined it would be a time for blooming and expanding. She regrets having opened up now, because she is categorically an odiferous weed. She is not thriving in this academic program. In and through it, she is not able to love God with all her mind. She is not able to focus only on what is [true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy].

Last semester, when she was workshopping some preliminary compositional sketches of an oil study from the Old Testament, her peers complained that religion was overtaking the piece and that it almost seemed she was losing herself to a Biblical interpretation. They could not allow for a relationship between religion and her personal life and feelings. The Biblical allusion was disruptive and overdramatic for them. They asked her whether she thought they were in a Christian college. One of them was flabbergasted that the project engaged "The Old Testament God" and said, "Without something to ground the composition, it's only colors, shapes, religious sentiment, and some effusion of human suffering. I lost hope in the end. These have no redemptive value and should be burned." She responded, "No gospel pun intended, hardy-har." Still laughing, she recounted for them a funny call she once heard a radio d.j. take in Colorado Springs one December, in which the frustrated caller was yelling about why Christians couldn't just butt out of Christmas already, since God had nothing to do with it. No one in her group had been joking, though. These serious problems for them ended up being affirmations for us, so she proceeded with the project. She is nearing the place with it where she and I like to stand back from the piece and agree it expresses who we are and how we see the world. I like to say, "I declare this 'good.'" It makes my face glisten. She says that's the closest I come to laughing: a beaming radiance. How many times she has wished she could paint that.

In the written feedback she received on the underpainting of the piece, her professor claimed the painting was “not appropriate, because it was not successful given the context of the discipline.” It felt “excessively shoehorned” to the professor, who warned her that she would have “greater success with other contexts.” The professor wrote, “Generally, I’m all in favor of efforts to connect course projects to preexisting areas of interest. However, the gulf between the religious issues and the content we are studying is not successfully bridged. While I am mindful of the possibility of a productive synergy between the two content domains, I think we have more of an accidental assonance between the domains than any actual intellectual overlap. Or, at the very least, the case for overlap is not successfully made in the current composition. The painting is insufficiently synthetic.” The course was studio time for “personal image exploration through independently conceived problems,” which she had declared for herself as “distances from Faiths.” The professor had said she must mean “distances *between* faiths,” and she replied, “No, those are much narrower than we imagine; it is our separation from our Faiths that is of much larger concern to me.”

Yes, I would choose others’ discriminations over her own disloyalty. Every time. If only I could get her to do the same, to trust in the gift of grace, to remain in peace with Love. Sometimes, she attempts to save herself. Other times, she questions whether I am worth all the trouble I cause. But in moments like this one, glory be! The left side of her belly must have felt the heat, from where I crouched in her artist apron pocket. I wish I were a better hugger for her, especially since it so often comes down to just the two of us. She thinks I know no shame. She is so distanced from the time humans were the same; she cannot conceive of what it is like not to regret anything that one has felt, thought, said, or done and never to have hurt someone very important to you. But the real difference between us is that she carries the death and the life of the Christ in her. I do not. Faiths are because of those phenomena, but they are not for us. I am a bridge, with one foot standing on each side. As she crosses in the Way from where she was to where she will be, I must stretch and flex.

We decided she better undergo her required art history course this semester and spend her studio time in her house. We also wanted her to complete her graduate-level course in a discipline related to her research interests. We looked in the Religious Studies Department’s catalog, but UWM does not offer any graduate courses in Religious Studies. She confirmed this with her advisor, who said if those were her interests, then she should be down the road at Marquette University. This advisor has also commented in the past that she should be going to seminary! Sometimes, I have no words, because there are no words. People will say something to her. Her breath will halt. She’ll look to me, and I have no response. We are from alter-realities, people and I. There is no way for these points-of-view to communicate the same scene. When her advisor said this to her, she formed all her thoughts into a question: “Um, do they teach painting in seminary?” I had her suggest that it might help her, if she could start a study support group that focused on Christianity and the arts, and the advisor said that was probably true, but she would not be able to advertise that on campus.

Later, she asked me in private how that could be, when there were so many special interest group meetings, and placards for these all over the walls of the Peck School of the Arts and the Union buildings. It is commonplace for people to establish boundaries for themselves and to define their identities through exclusions. I reminded her of the occasion, ten years ago, when she was

an undergraduate and one of her professors pulled her aside before class to point out that she was one of the most prominent voices in the classroom and to request that she withhold her comments and remain quiet. That way, other voices would have a chance to speak, and everyone could hear what they have to contribute. She'd had her opportunity and her say. Now, let others get theirs, so everyone else could listen to their positions. Well, due to the hegemony of the Judæo-Christian faith spectrum in U.S.-American academia up through the twentieth century, many contemporary scholars believe it has been enough. It is time for other speakers to have the floor and to represent. She understood; she nodded and relented. We must provide room for forgiveness, so God may balance all things. I engender spaces where there may be a balance of return.

In her art history course, the students take turns offering short interpretive essays on various works of art to catalyze class discussion. A few students, before each class session, post those to their online course management system for the rest of the class to read in preparation. She signed up at the beginning of the semester to submit for today's class session. They are considering one of Mir Sayyid Ali's Mughal pages. Our response focused on the importance of the Islamic practice of hospitality to keep the figures in harmony with one another in the compositional setting. To start class, the professor states that there were obviously no religious implications either present or intended by the painter, and that's all that is said indirectly or directly to address our ideas. This act of repression proves to be an isolated incident, since the class propels into the next two interpretations and covers them in detail. Another nail.

Her classmates take liberties with their comments, demonstrating their safe assumption and subtle judgment that everyone in the room agrees about the "idiocy" of "these people," "the religious right," "those fundamentalists," such that no one can imagine "where they get their ideas," unless it's from the "cavemen." Then, once again, a platform opens for someone to make fun of our campus evangelist nicknamed "The Pen Man," a young man who stands in high-traffic spots and asks passers-by, "Would you like some free pens?" He holds out two pens rubber-banded together with a paper slip attached. If you take them and read the paper at your leisure, you will find it to be an evangelical missive. That's about as disturbing as it gets (i.e., to question scholars' commitments to their thinking), except for when his pen distribution is suspended, because someone interested in his perspective stops to inquire and he engages in that one-to-one conversation. From what I gather, he is a ridiculous presence. No one disagrees.

I cannot abide. We are way past my nudging her. I am beating on her chest. She pinches her sweater to pull it away from her body in order to conceal my commotion. It is me she must silence. Since she cannot separate me from any part of herself, then she must separate me from them. She knows I trust God to balance, even our own forgiveness. She knows I will forgive, even her. Later, in private, neither of us can explain to the other why what we hold sacred must be belittled to make room for upholding something else. I suggest how one person is often disrespected to make another person look more admirable. This is the farthest I come from laughing: the beaming radiance on others' faces in moments of homogenous jocularity about Scripture, the Word she heard that brought me to her, in the beginning. Our story, read satirically.

She has idealized communities of artists who form schools of thought and technique; who study, travel, and show together; who offer long-term critical support to one another; who learn what each other does and what each individual contributes to the group; who invite others into the group from those they recognize rising along the same tendencies. She thought graduate school would mean grafting into such a bramble. She was not entirely wrong. She can see how her colleagues greet each other: on the first day of classes, at the occasional meeting, at scheduled talks, at gallery events, in the copy room. Their eyes get so big and their eyebrows raise so high, when they recognize faces. They smile with open mouths, and out pop shouts of names, squeals, or laughs. They embrace. They decide where to sit together, still touching each other. They remain clustered as they mingle. They talk and talk and talk. They discuss where they should go to eat or have drinks after this, or inquire into whether they are both planning to go to an event and should arrange that evening together, or invite each other to their parties.

One of the women, who likes to say “I make lines” when asked which medium she practices, has the most admiring green gaze. She lavishes it on her friends. A person knows it, when s/he has never looked into such affection. When I have that countenance, it is for the divine. This is joy taken into the soul. This is the face of God when a person first wakes in the morning.

A few times, her colleagues have come up to her of their own volition. Her heart skips a beat. But then, they ask for clarification on an administrative or bureaucratic question, because she is always so informed, helpful, and nice. In high school, she was voted “Class Tenderheart.” On the surface, that does not seem like a problem; it may even seem like a compliment. But humans see kindness as weakness.

After she answers, they turn to scan the room for a fun conversation. She must be the one to approach, the one to try to join. She must be the one to greet. And she does, and she makes both them and herself sorry. She wilts the conversation. The group uproots itself. She has seen all the different ways a person can get out of returning a greeting, can close a conversation, can shorten sentences, can manage to wander off—all impressively efficient, like a ladies’ evening clutch snapping shut. Twice now, at different open-invitation parties, the same man—popular for his social charisma—has interrupted her to take away the person to whom she was speaking, apologizing both times that there is someone to whom that person just *has* to talk. If she could shrink the way I do, I am convinced these two moments would have physically reduced her.

After class, she sits with a group circled up on sofas and chairs, who are discussing a recent graduate getting married in India. The alumna has decided, after an initial period of resistance, to undergo the *mehndi* ritual tradition. They are talking about the celebration lasting for a full week. She remembers so vividly those prolonged Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu occasions, and she interjects, “Yeah, the region is notorious for giving raucous parties that just don’t stop.” She ‘raises the roof’ with her hands, smiling. Not everyone looks at her; some look at the floor, or each other. One woman slides off the lap of another and drops herself onto the floor to gape at her from down there. The man next to her says into the air in front of him, “I think ‘notorious’ is a bit of a harsh word.” The group starts talking amongst themselves, just to the one or two people sitting right next to them. She can only get them to laugh at her by turning her back on them. She practices one of the smooth aforementioned exit strategies she has had ample opportunity to

study. They quickly revive after she weeds herself out, stretching and reclining into each other like a pile of cats. To them, she can only ever be a person of hate. Poisonous.

She creeps off to her supply storage locker to gather her things. We will take the long bus ride back to the house for the day. Heading down the tiled hallway, she happens upon an especially outspoken colleague sneaking a cigarette beside a cracked window and asks whether she could speak personally to her. She requires recognition from someone besides me that her peers treat her differently. An obvious pattern of behavior is embedding itself, and this semester, she is more certain of it. This is the way it is going to be for her here. She wonders if the other woman, too, has noticed. One excuse at a time, the woman says it is because she is recently divorced, because she does not go to the events, because she lives so far out there in Sherman Park. But each time, she retaliates that surely her divorce doesn't matter that much to any fellow students who know about it, that she is present but unnoticed at events, that she has offered to host several times but received all no's, and that it is a commuter school and several come in from other places. The woman uncurls the stiff hem of her denim skirt with her three fingers not clasping her cigarette while she says it: "I know we like to believe we're liberal-minded and progressive at this school and that we're tolerant and accepting of everyone, but—" She interrupts herself to assess how my girl is doing. Returning her attention to brushing some ash off her skirt, she continues. "Look, it's the religious thing. It's because you've aligned yourself with religion. It's unsettling for some people." It's unsettling for my girl, who rebuts, "But that's my subject matter. My area of study. As far as my peers know, I personally could believe anything." The woman recognizes that. She can't change any of this. These are line-makers.

That's the hardness and rockiness about loving all that is holy; it is a setting apart, a calling out. It can be a feast or a fast. One must be willing to adapt. That is why the transport of one of God's children from the life here to the life there has caused humans to declare it their arch-enemy, because it is a separating out to make holy. It is a drawing away and a bringing near. And humans suddenly feel and fear the distance and the ability to bridge it. All they suddenly see is a divide.

The pastor of the church we just found at Christmastime announced on Sunday from the pulpit that she is resigning. She will assume a directorship with the Greater Milwaukee Synod. When she said that, I looked around at that shrunken church-body in that echoing sanctuary and wondered what that would mean for them. The girl leaned over to me and whispered, "I know why no one ever invites anyone else to church here. Can you imagine any of my schoolmates here? Can you imagine their seeing me in this place? If they didn't think they were right to be concerned and doubtful about me before . . ." I squeezed her knee with my tendrils; her eyes were soft, and her lids low. She is counting on this congregation all the more to provide support she lacks at school—the only reason we are in this city. The church's support is always more important than any she might find elsewhere. But I sense the church is more hoping for her support. When they speak of their glories, they use the past tense.

She knows I want her to be pliable and to reflect back the expression I hold on what is my face, as if she were the mirror image. She knows I want her to drive out worry, which makes me jealous, because the presence of her fear makes it as if I were not here, or as if I were not grounded and rooted in what is trustworthy. She knows I want her to remember all that the past

few years have taught us about provision, perseverance, and peace-making. She knows. But when will she learn?

Saint Valentine's Day

Tuesday, 14 February 2012

Zion community, Bellefonte, PA 16823

Zion must have been named by or after one of the local, yesteryear Amish or Mennonite churches—faiths still present in a few families in the neighborhood. I look across the soft valley melting into the distance in either direction behind the house, and I can tell it did not feel blue or white light, but only yellow, from humans for many passings of many generations. This house is just one of dozens being squeezed together by building contractors on narrow but viable tracts of land—each 3,000-square-foot house usually taking six fast months to complete, with projects erected in staggered stages next to each other, reminding those who have taken occupancy of how easily exposed the skeleton of their shelter is. Case in point, several of the older, original homes to the community are being disassembled, piece by piece, by Amish men in dark pants and dark suspenders, who grumble over the invention of nails. The pieces are carted off in clattering stacks. The Amish men are collected by hired vans.

Our road dead-ends on Zion Road, which does not itself end but, in timeless irony, turns into Bishop Street on one end and Nittany Valley Drive on the other. At that T-intersection, the matriarch of a Mennonite household cannot sleep. Hers is not the only case of insomnia we have encountered in Centre County, which is at the exact heart of a cross drawn over the roughly rectangular Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and which is studied for its excessive stormy darkness. This mother bakes, night after night, in her brick ranch house, the lamplight from her kitchen window falling yellow on her lawn. She places her baked goods in a cooler at the end of her driveway, with a rock-bottom price list, money-deposit can, and faith in the honor system, if it really even matters. The cash exchange may be a formality for an efficient disposal system—a screen to a husband who refuses to take another bite of shoofly pie, chocolate-chip zucchini bread, sticky buns, apple dumplings, whoopie pies, cinnamon raisin bread . . .

Amish neighbors live at the back of the community on the farmland that fans away from the suburban development, like a peacock train, along higher country. Their grazing animals stand alongside and stare at the new construction squatting on what used to be their land to roam. Like everyone else, the Amish return home from Zion Road—the buggies audible before visible. The passenger-side wheels shimmy in the shoulder gravel, and the driver-side wheels vibrate along the blacktop. Whenever a son drives alone, he whips the reins with one hand, holds his hat with the other, and rumbles past in a grinning frenzy. Like he knows he is a target. Other citizens rush to get Halfmoon Township to prohibit livestock on the residential properties, thereby making the land itself inhabitable for the remnant among us who has tended it the longest. But then again, the arrival of the Amish more than likely caused the exodus of a faith before theirs. It always goes back to a Spirit moving in a garden, and humans following close behind, caring too devotedly.

This breaks her heart about this place: indefatigable, beleaguered faith. It speaks to her of why she is married. I felt such kinship with his Faith when they met upon her return to college. We'd been made from nothing and were at about the same stage of development. He did not want to take her to off-campus parties, but rather for two swirled flavors of fat-free frozen yogurt. And I was welcome and encouraged to be fully present at all times with them. He was proud of me in public, and he prayed and meditated on Scripture with us in private. She fell in love with him, because it was the first time that I felt like home to her. She could be completely at ease with me. We could belong to each other, and we could belong together. He fell in love with her when he was apologizing for their having to walk to church, and she responded that it was the least she could do in the face of what had been done for her to grant her all of Life. When he proposed their marriage, he mentioned that moment and then told her that he wanted to do the same for her—give himself up for her, as an Ephesians husband. They would rise early on Sunday mornings, in the silence of their dorms, walk through a sleeping campus and along empty streets, bemused by the difference from the previous day's traffic and bustle for the home game. Of course, where we are now, State College's population triples when the Nittany Lions are playing at home. It must in order to pack out the fourth largest stadium in the world with 106,000 attendees.

In those gestures of pleasing and being pleased, of being meant for each other's pleasure, as relationship was designed and intended to be, she found her life with me exciting and limitless. She scoffed at any suggestions from others that it is boring and limited. I was always getting her into dangers, like Love. I planted us here. She could sense it was a sort of arrival. She stood inside this house and knew in her heart: these are the golden days. She told herself this, straining to soak in their pleasure. These peaceable moments were her portion. She was as pliant as a willow and drinking deep from an endless fount. How many times I have wished she could paint that.

But in those longings to locate "home" in this world, when she can have no concept of what "home" is, she transferred that feeling from me, where it had finally resided, to this hollow structure. She redefined the "success" and "justification" I afford her. She grew warm in the sun, fell asleep, and does not stir in the wind. He thinks she is luxuriating and that this is a good thing—humans at rest and ease. He is now pleased with himself.

These days, she resists my awakening, my healing, my blessings of Life. She can see I look bedraggled, dried up, that I am no longer blossoming. Her summer is my winter. My dormancy is sickening. She cannot see we are mutually inclusive. She wants to take risks of self that do not involve me, and she does not provide me with what I need to grasp and explain why I believe that is impossible. Even though I have matured from the early days when her claims befogged me, I am still restrained to near breathlessness. I am only fifteen, and I remember how childlike she seemed to me when she was fifteen. Her twenties have taught her that nothing is ever as she plans. I could have told her that the first morning we met, but she prefers lessons from life over lessons from me. She continues to believe life may surprise her, whereas she always knows what I think. I am too available to her. At her disposal. Easily wasted.

I am incapable of fear, but I am aware she may cease her intentional support of her spiritual growth, and we will not move beyond this point. I could and need to be so much more; I could

and need to take us so much farther. Yet she insists I need understand only this: humans are not nourished and cultivated in the same way Faiths are; they do not grow in response to sun alone; they cannot withstand the weathering of the world; and, they do not spring back with all the more verdure when they are pruned. There are times, too, when they do not want to bear fruit. She resents that she has given me more attention than she has given herself. It is enough. She has seen where this has led.

She yells all this more at herself than at me. She knows I in my weakest state can yet overcome her strongest conviction. I am not dependent on her; she is dependent on me. I am aligned with the Will to work all things together for her good. She would have her Will, which asks nothing of her and, when it is moved to sacrifice, can set comfortable limits. This causes it to be frequently misdirected and meandering. She so enjoys the fact that the decisions are not mine to make. That she can leave me out of them. Not that I would take from her the ability to make decisions, even those against my guidance. I am not the one who needs to make wise decisions; I am not the one who can make foolish decisions. Whatever she does decide, one way or the other, we receive an equal number of opportunities to learn and, thus also, to grow. Even if those opportunities are not equivalent in value. She does not realize she often chooses to learn the hard way and to grow through difficulty. The gates to the pathways of digression and regression are both open to us. I know we cannot help but get to our destination, but I imagine the stunted condition in which we may arrive. I want to fill her out for that day. She is my legacy. My life lived.

The real divisiveness between us occurs in my asking her to prioritize Love above all else. With everything that I am and have been given, I strive to make her a person of Love. In every way that I am able to learn and grow, I apply it to that mission. This is partly for my benefit, because you may say anything to humans and they will hear you out, if they know you are speaking to them out of Love. And right now, I find her idea of divorce hate-full. How can she claim mercy, compassion, and grace as her own, as our Way, when she is incapable of living them out? What place do they have with her then? Where can they be found about her? In this world, these are the only salvations of Love. In this world, whenever any being is in a relationship of Love with a human, eventually the human will hurt that being, and in order to continue in that relationship of Love, that being must find the Way around the disappointment and heartache the human has caused, which requires letting go of Self to embrace the human. If others have done this for them, why can't they manage it for each other? Do they deny Love?

Her husband wants to believe their Faiths or our God let them down. After all, we enable them to practice what they preach. *Where were you?*, they ask, when they think of us again. *I am here. Unconsulted.* The two stopped building a culture of their Faiths as soon as they established us as a family. They lost our Way in the gardens of cultures. He lost track of the path of spiritual leading. He, too, acts for her Will and not her good; he is concerned about pleasing her, and no longer the Love he had before her. She has forgotten what is precious about him. One of the ways that she is human.

His Faith and I can express very little to each other through them anymore. The roles have reversed: we are now the ones to look at each other longingly while the two humans say, "Wait." We evince their becoming "people of little Faith." We watch each other condensing to such

miniscule sizes as to be undetectable and forgotten. No Faith wants to be worthless until the moment of redemption.

Emperor Claudius II—the Cruel—believed unmarried soldiers fought better (i.e., without fear) and were more willing to join military leagues. He, therefore, prohibited marriage of young people. This action yielded a culture of permissiveness in sexual partnering. Saint Valentine, at the time, was a Roman priest and physician, steeled in the convictive values of his Faith. He continued to encourage the young couples to marry in the Christian Church, even though that meant he must perform the ceremonies in secret. After being caught, imprisoned, and tortured, the Prefect of Rome adjudged that his activity further deserved a three-part execution through beating, stoning, and decapitation. Who knows at what point his body gave up the ghost?

She and her husband no longer recognize the challenges to their Faiths, nor are they interested in our endangerments. They thought that since the house was built, it would stand. It had one job: to shelter them. These beings, who are bone at the core and who breathe spirit. They look to delusive vacant spaces that were open to the wide, stretching valley a moment ago. One good blow, and the two of them would be standing again, where they stood last spring, like trees, among the sinking sun and the swaying grasses and the lowing cows.

Today, they are forced to admit to each other that neither of them chose to recognize this special day for the other. This is the new way in which they find themselves together. They offer the cynical platitude that Saint Valentine's Day assimilated its name from the body of Christ and that it has nothing to do with them, or with the love they are supposed to have for each other. It belongs now to a culture of void.

She met recently with a church elder to discuss her displeasure at having married a man only to watch him grow into a boy whom she cannot wean. When she went into the church office with him, she left me seated in a chair outside the room and shut the door. I heard her laugh sharply at the expression on the elder's face, when she told him she could not get her husband off her teat. Afterward, I asked her about their exchange to invite her confidence in me, since she had ended up only acting that out for him. But that being the case, she had not retained anything he said, and all she could remember of what she had said was that she would never be anything more than her husband's name preceded by a title to indicate she was not him after all. *No, I denied, though she did not deserve it. Your bridegroom will place in your palm a smooth white stone with the inscription of your new name, which will be as familiar to you as what you have always known. You will be fulfilled in its revelation. Boundless as its echo. It will awaken and raise you the moment it is called. You will see.* I so badly want to save her from all these reasons she will have for being sorry when she does. In that moment, she will not be able to do anything but regret.

Divorce will forever change the four of us, and not as she imagines. On the surface, it will mean he and his Faith no longer live with the two of us—by certificate—and are supposed to be “dead” to her. The world will tell her he is not her family anymore and that she should act as if that were true, in complete disregard of their spiritual relationship. In its impact, I will have to pray God's speed to my most bonded Faith companion I have known. And Faiths do not have the comfort of grieving such departures as our humans grieve, since they may say, “until we meet

again in glory to spend eternity together forevermore.” Our likelihood is that we will never see each other again. Immortals cannot help but be related in the grand scheme, even if she has departed from the strongest spiritual partner she will ever know among humankind. The rest is pretense. For earthly show. She looks forward to leaving him. He is ready to be appreciated and respected again in a way he can no longer recall feeling. I only entangle him.

She and I argue about how I did and did not bring her to this place. She says to me, “If Grama were here to see us fighting with each other like this, she would suck in her breath and hiss out, ‘Shame!’ ” Her grandmother valorized beauty and told her, time and again, that she will find no equal to mine in this world. This is because the girl is my beauty. She feels this burden when she looks in my eyes and asks what has become of me. “You are such a lamentable creature. You are no help to me.” I get all the credit, and none of it. The world tells her to be ashamed of me, of my presence, but they do not see me. They can only see me through her. That is her testimony. So, on the occasions when she has separated me far from my glory, she fears someone getting the wrong idea about me from her. No wonder she hides her face: *Do not look at my Creator now, like this, in me; that is not what is showing.* “God, I am sorry,” she prays, “and false.” She only ever risks her self.

Christmas Eve

Tuesday, 24 December 2014

Sherman Park neighborhood, Milwaukee, WI 53216

Moving so many times has taught us that everywhere is pretty much the same. We get there, and she has to find the place to which she will return every night to bathe and sleep, the place she will buy her food and toilet paper, the place she will go if she cuts off her finger or can’t stop coughing. After those come the other places, for having her hair trimmed, borrowing books, getting new shoes, letting someone else cook for her upon occasion, escaping into entertainment for a few hours, or making note of a good spot to meet any new friends. Everywhere has the same kinds of places, because people are basically human in the same way, with the same self-interests, which means the same needs. The differences appear in method and style but are slight, at that. She just has to figure out how her new neighbors go about doing a thing or taking care of a thing. Everything winds up being recognizably human. Like Christmas—the celebration of being human. Or maybe of becoming human along the way.

Despite the bitter evening, I think we should walk around the neighborhood to discover why else we might be here. Why else here might be special or unique in any way for us. She knows I try to spy out and catch the Spirit at work, the way children do with Father Christmas. With some of these exterior Christmas light displays, I can’t tell whether we’re celebrating Christ’s first or second coming. But sparkling is *the* sign of magic to humans nonetheless. The time she and I left the garish, affronting Vegas strip, the rest of the world did look drab for a while. People want to believe being human has better attractions than they’ve realized. Of course, their Faiths want the same thing.

I was right. Without removing our gazes from our discovery, we grab each other’s limbs. Surely, it is our gift, set in a drift of snow: a neighborhood church not quite one mile from the house.

Why has this not shown up “Nearby” on Google Maps? My branches rake her downy sleeve, as she tears away and runs right into Sherman Boulevard to cross. Immortals! Her grandmother liked to tease me with a joke she picked up once from her son-in-law, the girl’s father: “You can’t live with ‘em; you can’t kill ‘em.” She always had a joke ready, if you were willing to pass through a few rehearsals before it got itself properly straightened out.

The pews are far from full, even though it is Christmas Eve. The sanctuary is so cold; the heat must not be working. Sitting still in the unpadded pew makes her wish she hadn’t left her coat in the coatroom. The people, though, sparkle with warmth. Almost everyone has hair that has worked its way white. The skin around their eyes crinkles like wrapping paper and makes them look all-too-knowing, and mischievous for it. The way the people greet each other with hugs and arm-clasps reveals how long they have been with each other—since smoother, firmer days. They ask after each other’s health, and how their drives were into Sherman Park in the dark and on the ice. When she tells them she lives in the neighborhood and has walked here, they tell her about ninety percent of the congregation commutes to the church and that only two others among them could be called her neighbors. Something must keep bringing them back.

The pastor is a bit impish-looking herself. She is even shorter than my girl is, and maybe even younger. Her straight-cut bangs sit high above her eyebrows, and the rest of her hair is cut just below her jawline. She tucks it behind her ears, but it is silky, so the front tresses cascade forward and curl out toward you. In her robe and stole, she looks like a vintage felt Christmas tree ornament of a child-chorister—minus the gold metallic pipe-cleaner halo. When she explains what they are doing tonight for the pageant, it seems she is endeavoring to keep things lively. And maybe covering a lack of children. They are to perform an impromptu production of the Christmas story, and the majority of the congregation will need to participate extemporaneously in the roles. They volunteer for the parts and then hurry to the boxes lined at the back of the sanctuary in order to don pieces of appropriate costumes. When they are ready, they are to come forward to receive scripts, from which they will read. Between passages, the remaining, seated congregational members will sing.

The girl does not expect anyone to volunteer for such a thing, but folks are comfortable with each other and at ease with an opportunity to be childlike. They set right to it, giggling, teasing, jostling over costumes, and ensuring everyone’s sashes are tied and turbans secure—which they aren’t, which I am certain the play will bear out. The preparation becomes a delightful production itself. As she watches them layer their Hebraic accessories over their Christmas sweaters, she envies the extra clothing and wishes it weren’t our first visit, so she could volunteer. I am glowing. She scooches nearer.

Faiths inspire me. And for her to invest her Faith in others’ faithfulness is the boldest she can be. The bravest words humans utter, the greatest praise humans give: “I believe in you.” What larger victory can anyone achieve? And how better is one uplifted? Her joy, from mine, makes them all the more aware of theirs. At Pentecost, people thought the inspired drunk.

The actors are naturals; their familiarity with the plot makes them move from scene to scene as if on cue: it must begin with the keeper of a bursting inn and a couple who would not have been traveling by choice; then, move to drowsy and isolated shepherds scattered among darkened

hills; next, pass into a rocky, stinky shelter for domesticated animals; and finally, end with a mother beginning the lifework of storing memories, wrapped in delicate tissue, in her heart. When they are done, the angels return to their pews, still winged. On some, the feathery boarding has come unglued and hangs like dead, furry limbs. When the service is complete, and the hot chocolate requires a new name, and the cookie tray offers crumbs only, these few angels cannot figure out why they cannot get on their coats, and someone from across the room has to call out that they still have on their wings. She is going to love these people forever. She began before we got here.

May she let me be home to her again. Even when I must persevere in it alone, I pray. Sometimes, there are only words. We are reduced to them. We are naught more. They are the doing. They are what is to be done. They are what appear. Words present a person; we encounter a person within and through them. Let them draw near to us and live among us. Amen.

Feast Day of Prophet Nahum ("God consoles") the Elkoshite
[Fixed Commemoration for the Saint on Eastern Orthodox liturgical Julian or "Old" Calendar]
Thursday, 14 December 2017
Near Granville Island, Vancouver, British Columbia V6J 1M1

In four days, it will be one year since her graduation. No one in her Sherman Park church recognized, realized, or remembered that she was graduating. It was at that time that the congregational members, in opposition to the visioning retreat's and the church council's recommendations, voted against dissolution; the interim pastor departed, having completed her work; and, an advisory commission from the synod and presbytery assembled, interviewing any remaining congregants who were willing and able to share the stories of the church. The congregation was bound to stay in that building. Bound and determined.

When the congregants made their plans together for how they would remain, they ended up with social outings (around Milwaukee and Wisconsin), social gatherings (in congregants' homes or care homes), and social events (at church). The last of these revolved around pot luck meals, and attendants were encouraged to wear appropriate clothes for the theme of the occasion: ugly sweaters, high tea frocks and suits, glam dress to impress. Neighbors who got a look at the church during funeral services returned sometimes to attend the worship services in that place. But they would see the 25 to 35 in attendance, listen to the one-off sermons by visiting pastors estranged to and losing their way in the order of worship, ask after the non-existent choir, and never cross the threshold again. All that was going wrong with the way of worship exposed a misperception and misunderstanding of God. It was not speaking of God what is right.

Participation continued to diminish, until one Sunday, four different people, unbeknownst to each other, managed to ask her to be on council, to be a deacon, to be a liturgical assistant, and to be a provider of fellowship refreshments. All these invitations should have been dedicated, isolated, directed, inspired callings for her, and she felt the disrespect to God in their synchronicity, since it suggested not one word of prayer or other inquiry into God's will preceded these inquiries into her will. Not only that, but their requests confirmed that no one had any idea she was preparing to fly the nest.

The Apostle Paul was highly valued by the churches he was serving, because what he had to offer was unique and rare, a special giftedness. When he would visit them, even though they knew they would not lose contact with him when he left, they were keen to get as much out of those in-person, in-depth interactions as possible. On his last night in Troas, where he had stayed only one week, he kept speaking to the congregation there, long into the night. There were no church buildings for this first generation of disciples. Completely unnecessary. Where there was no church, there spontaneously is a church. They packed out any available space simply to hear and learn about the Christ from those who had known and could remember Jesus. On that night, everyone crowded into a third-story open-concept room in someone's house, and one young man chose a seat for himself in the window. He would not leave, even though Paul spoke on and on, and he was struggling to keep his eyes open. When he finally succumbed to sleep, he fell right out the window and hit the ground. Paul had to rush down the stairs and outside to revive his life among them. Only then did Paul suggest they go ahead and break the bread, which was the reason they had come together that evening.

She suggested to the head of the deacons, who was the one to request she supply snacks, that, given the circumstances, refreshments for the fellowship hour could be suspended. The woman laughed in her face and said, "Are you kidding? Fellowship is the best part of our church." Not long after that, the first of the advisory commission to resign did so, citing the church's adopted attitude of "Last one out, shut off the lights." The remaining advisory commission transformed itself out of an advisory role and into a decision-making role. They would no longer be the Faiths walking alongside; they would be the humans acting in representation.

Few congregants showed up at church with their Faiths, who had been left at home, where everything would be more comfortable for them, and the church humans could be more comfortable without their Faiths' imposition. Faiths are rarely accused of being relevant in The Real World. "Hush," mommies say to toddlers, "the adults are talking." We are experts in another world and naïve about this one. Only the weakest minded would listen to us or need us to help them. For those Faiths who were present, their faces were often turned away from the conversations their humans were having and looking into vacancy. My girl, often winded and finally stirred in life, turned to me more and more frequently during that time. She was shouting new ideas at me in private, ones I had never heard from her or seen in her mind:

"The Word is not there; prayer is not there; worship is not there. Faiths are not shared. It's just people. They've isolated themselves. To honor their ways. How is this a church? There is no calling, no vision. Everyone's only concerned about what they think would be good. And only for the church—I mean, the building. No one mentions the Spirit's movement, or God's will, or Faiths' leadings. This is not a church. That building is empty. As empty as the temple when God departed it. The soul has left the body, and the body is at rest."

She wrote an e-mail in her agony and sent it to the deacons, who were still planning all the activities of the church and trying to make them attractive:

One of the main reasons people are no longer interested in the Christian Church is because they cannot see its value for their lives. They do not 'use' the services of the Church, because they do

not sense how they make any difference to their lives. The world always offers better alternatives in business opportunities, entertainment, food and beverage, etc. The one and only thing the Church can offer that the world cannot better is Christ. Christ attracts people, and people are attracted to Christ. If people come to a local church, it is because they sense Christ there. The local church should be advocating for Christ and living out Christ's life in the world.

If we invite every person in the city to an event, and Christ is not the guest of honor, whom we are presenting and praising to the world, then the only thing we have to offer is ourselves and the utilization of our building. And we're pretty cool, and our meeting place is indeed useful. But the loveliness found in the dwelling places of God does not come primarily from any physical beauty. So, if they do not find Christ here, among us, then they will either take advantage of the use we can be to them, go to another church to seek after Christ's calling, or turn back into the far cooler world. They have to be here for Christ; not for us, and not for the lovely space. They need Christ; not us, and not our property.

If Christ's will even is for our church to grow, then the Holy Spirit will convict the hearts of our leaders to guide the members into the works of Christ's call, as Christ modeled them, which are teaching and studying God's word wherever you are, going out from where you are and preaching God's word, testifying to your Faith in Christ, and praying corporately and privately. To borrow a common expression, we should "do Us." Whatever we do, we must do it in Christ's name and for Christ's glorification; and whatever we offer, it must be Christ-centered and Christ-motivated.

When she clicked "Send" on that message, I was so enlarged that she had to turn down the heat in the house. She got one response. Within a few hours, a return e-mail arrived from the same head of the deacons who had been so concerned about the condition of the cake service. The first line read, "Thank you for your insight. I don't agree."

That summer, on August 13th, police patrol officer Domo Heaggan shot and killed Sylville Smith on the 3200 block of 44th in Sherman Park. Hundreds of people responded by burning eight buildings in our neighborhood. Some of our bus stops were overturned, and a few of our neighbors towed home burnt cars. A couple of fellow UWM students, who were still living at home for the summer, were media interns and were notified to head to the riot scene in order to film footage. When the mob saw them, they yelled, "No Whites! You shouldn't be here!" It had become sacred ground; it had been set apart. The boys were beaten, and their equipment was taken and broken.

When the interim pastor addressed what had happened from the pulpit, my girl turned her attention to the smaller, secondary sanctuary in the church, down the hall from where she sat. It was used by a congregation just cropping up but whose worship could be heard over ours. They named themselves "Kingdom Builders," but it was our congregation, as The Land Lord, who maintained the property. Shortly after the violence, she was pulling weeds in the back of the church building, and a neighbor came up to introduce himself and chat. He tested her (and me) by confessing that his last church did not tolerate his alcoholism, but she showed no offense and assured him that Love is greater than Faith, precedes Faith, and causes Faith to become; that Faith is in Love; that his person is more important than his treatment of himself. He replied,

“Y’all aren’t bad people. I tell people in the neighborhood that. You’re all right. You haven’t done anything wrong in the neighborhood.” She thought he was separating us out as Christians, so he shocked her by adding, “Everyone says you’re just old, dried-up, white folks, but y’all are good people, and you’ve done good things in this neighborhood.” With one-third of our congregants being people of color and our adjoining African-American congregation, she could not understand how our identity was dictated in this way.

Thus, at the subsequent visioning retreat, when we finished discussing what we would have to do in order to stay in Sherman Park (which no one realized was an entirely different question than what we would have to do in order to stay in the church building), everyone was offering ways in which we would have to undergo technical or practical change, like funding the building and diversifying the music. But she realized that adaptive or transformational change must be the real need for 21st-century churches. Everything else is fallow—or maybe the harvest already come to fruition. Either way, she raised her hand and requested the addition of three items to the list. We will need to: fall back in love with Sherman Park; develop a heart for the main demographics of the community; release worry and fear about Sherman Park to God.

Sennacherib king of Assyria finished the demise of Israel’s northern ten-tribe kingdom, whose inhabitants were taken as captives into the regions of Nineveh, never to return and little concerning them to be reported again. When Sennacherib advanced on Jerusalem and Hezekiah king of Judah, he ridiculed Hezekiah for having reduced the worship of God down to one place, one altar, and he blasphemed the God of Israel and Judah by asking, “How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?” He received an answer personally, and then, Assyria received an answer generally, in accordance with Nahum’s prophetic vision, with the impending fall of Nineveh. In each instance, God asked for nothing from the Israelites to make these responses, except to stand and witness. When Jerusalem did fall later to Babylon, God shut the doors to the house of God, ascended in flight above it, and made ready to go with the people of God into their exile. God is not limited to location or settled in a home. While on earth, Jesus did not choose a place to lay his head, neither did he remain here for long, only as long as necessary. God makes humans temples and comes and dwells in them, among them, before them, beside them, and above them. God goes with us. Bringing us into spacious places of refuge and beauty. The chief corner stone is portable and unmovable. And it is marvelous in their eyes.

The church in Sherman Park did not properly identify the enemy from whom they needed to be delivered—the enemy insulting God by suggesting they not depend on God for what was to happen. They believed those surrounding them needed the awakening. And so, the wind picked them up and scattered them. And God shut the doors. Their witness is that it was a besiegement of unbearable expense that caused them to lose their altar. They were confessed debtors.

She did not have to see the holy closure. It was not necessary to her. She packed up her own things, slapped up a fresh coat of paint, and put up her house for sale. We wandered off without anyone noticing. With the last of her inheritance money and divorce settlement, we left the midwestern United States and came as close to Granville Island as she could afford. She bought a storefront and started a gallery selling local artists’ works, along with her own. She teaches classes here and hosts Canadian winetasting and landscape painting studio sessions. We live in a nook of a space in the loft.

Today, R. C. Sproul died in Florida. Her hero. Far and away, her favorite theologian. She has loved his words her entire adulthood, and she has grown increasingly dependent on the materials from his Ligonier Ministries since her Milwaukee experience. If you were to ask her, "If you could meet anyone in the world, who would it be?," it would have been Dr. Sproul. She will have a greater chance now of doing so. In this world, it would have been highly improbable. In the next, it'll be a cinch. The first line of his last letter to the supporters of his ministries read, "It's easy to be afraid these days." The schedule for his daily broadcast sermon has reported, for months, that tomorrow's played-back message will be "The Believer's Final Rest." Well done. I wish I could thank him for these last foreseeing gestures, for her sake. They will help me comfort her with their prophetic nature toward the Beloved's needs upon his departure from them.

She collapses on the kitchenette floor when she hears of God's decision. It is weeping. But no, it does not feel like a step backward to me. She is the same person, and she is not. Feeling the loss of a loved one is beautiful. It is divine. Fearing the loss of a meeting space is entirely different. That suggests God will no longer meet with you, and you may no longer meet those whom you have loved. Now that she has separated from it and gained some distance, she can see that. In his letter, Dr. Sproul asks all to pray for awakening, that we need see no more wreckage of lives, Faiths, and cultures from passivity. Asking for one to show bravery is the next step after asking for one not to fear. Even if they manage the first, they may or may not make it to the second.

For now, she shuts the shop, so she may freely move in and out of mourning the loss of her last spiritual leader on the surface of this earth. "Land," so aptly named. I lie next to her on her futon. She clenches the hems of her sheet and blankets against her chest. Crumpled tissues cascade down the mound of her. I tell her to read the seventh chapter of Isaiah, in which God tells the people, through the prophet Isaiah, that God will awaken Assyria. She reaches the end of the ninth verse, when God says, "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

When the greatest forces rise against you and tell you that you are destined to die and that no one will be there to save you from that death, and you must rely on your Faith, then you are going to want to have prepared it to stand and take every assault like arrows, every false word, every fear tactic, every hateful prejudice, and stand there still.

She looks at me looking at her. She knows she has reached the place I meant her to find in the reading and that she need go no further. She closes the book and her eyes, and she lays one hand on me. She thanks God for me. And she thanks God for never leaving her without one spiritual leader. She does not mean me.

There is nothing standing between her and heaven.

kristin fay

curriculum vitae

Education

Ph.D., English–Creative Writing, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee,

Dissertation: *Things from of Old*, a collection of short stories

Committee Members: Liam Callanan (Chair), Josepha Lanter, Valerie Laken,
George Clark, and Anne Basting

Special Emphasis in Professional Writing, through coursework

M.A., English–Creative Writing, State University of New York–Albany, May 2013

B.A., English–Creative Writing, Colorado State University–Fort Collins, May 1999

Other Education

Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild–Black Forest, CO, 2004–2006

Apprenticeship under Master Craftsman Jeanette Gardner Littleton

Teaching

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2013–2018

Face-to-face

ENG 233: Introduction to Creative Writing

ENG 102: College Writing and Research

ENG 101: Introduction to College Writing

[including Academic Opportunity Center sections

for students needing additional academic support in core subject areas]

ENG 100: College Writing and Reading

Online

ENG 233: Introduction to Creative Writing

ENG 102: College Writing and Research

Instructor, Community Education Program

Western Colorado Community College–Grand Junction, 2010

Writing Short Fiction

Instructor, Summer Adult Program

San Jose City College, 1998

Introduction to Creative Writing

Other Teaching Experience

Instructor, “Unsung Heroes,” 2017

Workshop to assist librarians at UWM’s Golda Meir Library with their stories of impact for use in marketing contexts

Facilitator, *TimeSlips* [founded by Anne Basting], 2016–2017

Creative storytelling project for people living with dementia and their caregivers

One-to-one Tutor

Creative writing for individuals living with dementia, private consultation, 2016–2017

Composition, The Writing Center, Colorado State University–Fort Collins, 1998–1999

High-school Literature and Writing, Advanced Learners, Mesa County, CO, 2009–2011

Youth Coach, Hilltop Residential Youth Services, Grand Junction, CO, 2011

Special Education Teaching Assistant, Unity Sunshine Childcare Program, Troy, NY, 2013

Research

Research Assistant & Dramaturg

“I Won’t Grow Up” Program Development, a multi-year, intergenerational project bringing creative engagement to elders in long-term care and exploring the meaning and value of childhood through the inspiration of J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan & Wendy Darling*, 2016–2017

Lead Team Members: Anne Basting, Lead Artist, Professor of Theatre at UWM, MacArthur Fellow; Angie McAllister, Lead Community Partner, Director of Cultural Transformation at Signature HealthCARE

Grant

Community University Partnership, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2014–2015 (\$3,500)

Project: *The Other Side of the Mirror: Fostering Creative Expression and Literacy in Communities Impacted by Incarceration*

Partners: *cream city review*, and Project RETURN

Conference Presentations

“Craftsmen,” *Illuminating Words, Transforming Beauty: Conf. on Christianity & Literature*, Spring Arbor University, 2016

“Kārath,” *Changes & Exchanges: 15th Annual Craft Critique Culture Conf.*, University of Iowa–Iowa City, 2015

Panel Member, *WAC-ky Possibilities: Writing Across the Curriculum for FYC and UWM* (seminar), University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2014

Research Poster Presenter, “Reflection, the Student’s Self-analysis through Writing,” *Those Who Can...Teach Pedagogy Conf.*, Marquette University, 2013

Editorial Positions

Editorial Board Member, *First Year Composition Reader, 2015–2017* (Pearson, 2015),
textbook for the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee First-year Writing Program

Copy Editor, *cream city review*, Milwaukee, WI, 2014–2017

Assistant Fiction Editor, *cream city review*, Milwaukee, WI, 2013–2014

Fiction Editor, *Barzakh*, Albany, NY, 2012–2013

Assistant Fiction Editor, *The Greyrock Review*, Fort Collins, CO, 1998

Editorial Internship, Accord Publishing, Ltd., Denver, CO, 1998

Administrative Positions

May 2007 – Nov. 2010

CFMI, Inc., Grand Jct., CO
Department Manager, & Trainer

Sept. 2005 – May 2007

StarTek, Grand Jct., CO
Project Manager, & Trainer

Aug. 2002 – Oct. 2004

Penn. State University Press, State College, PA
Clerk, & Trainer

Oct. 2001 – June 2002

Wienken & Associates, State College, PA
Assistant Office Manager

Dec. 1999 – Sept. 2001

Sharkey, Howes & Javer, Inc., Denver, CO
Administrative Assistant

July 1999 – Dec. 1999

Christian Coalition of Colorado, Denver, CO
Director of Operations (6-month contract)

Distinctions

Student Success Award, 2013–2014

From the Associate Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management, on behalf of the
students at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, for Teaching Excellence

Competitive Creative and Performing Arts Awards with Scholarships, 1997–1999

From the Department of English, for Fiction Submissions

Academic Service

Conference Organizer, 10th Annual Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conf.: “Animacy,”
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2014–2015

Conference Organizer, 11th Annual Graduate Student Conference Committee: “Considering
Relevance”, State University of New York–Albany, 2012–2013

Judge, 13th Annual UW System Symposium for Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity,
Poster Presentations, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, 04/11/2014

English Graduate Student Organization, State University of New York–Albany, 2011–2013

Church Leadership Service

Stephen Minister, trained and certified in 2001

Missions Committee Chair, including drafting new Missions Policy and Guidelines, 2002–2004

Liturgist, 2016–2017

Deacon, 2017

Readings

Creative Non-fiction. Chrysalis: Life Writing, Woodland Pattern Book Center, Milwaukee, WI,
05/13/2014

Fiction. United We Read, Café Hollander, Milwaukee, WI, 03/16/2017

Professional Memberships

Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP), Fairfax, VA, 2013–Current

The Conference on Christianity & Literature (CCL), Wheaton, IL, 2014–Current

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Urbana, IL, 2014–2018