STORIES WRITTEN HERE

by

Eliza Minot

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Written under the direction of

Alice Elliott Dark

And approved by

Jayne Anne Phillips

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We all live alone together. We hardly know each other! You and me, all of us, young women who’d lived a little nuts, a little scatterbrained and crazy, when we were even younger, but now we live alone. We live alone quietly, all together, aiming to be calm and thoughtful, trying to work at our jobs, if we have them, and to take care of our own selves, which is what we hear people do when they get more mature. It isn’t easy to not get tangled into other people’s troubles. It is so much easier to twist into someone else’s difficulties, like a vine, than to wrestle our thick tendrils out and look at our own flattened person. What we learned in the crazy days when we were even younger was that we had enough troubles of our own. We think about the different parts of ourselves, all of the women inside each of us. We think about how pain can direct us. Slowly, living alone, we hope we’ll learn how to grow.

There are quite a few of ourselves, alone in this studio. Some of us are sometimes loose, wild and combative. Others are generally out on lonely limbs, about to fall from
branches. Most of us sit ready in the studio that we’ve rented, maybe scrubbing the filthy stove, maybe buying cheap flowers at the deli to brighten things up. Anna, the excellent waitress who’s about to leave for her brunch shift, stands by the big white sink in her white shirt and black pants, her clean red apron. Daisy, next to her, is a terrible waitress, forgetful and dreamy, more preoccupied with her predictions of what people will order—she will be an angel hair person, he will want lasagna—than what they actually ask for. Sylvia wears headphones most of the time so we don’t have to hear the music while she makes tons of her mixed tapes. Sylvia keeps her headphones on almost all of the time, and then puts her running shoes on and goes for runs. Mia, a girl who sketches non-stop, sits next to our studio’s window drawing the airshaft with its trapezoid of sky.

We are lucky that our studio has a view of the sky. We are on the second floor. We have two windows that overlook a rooftop that’s one flight down and is the rear of the building. It is surrounded by walls of other buildings. It is a large rooftop, so there is a good deal of space, like a small cove or a playing field. The rooftop is covered with vents and fans, pipes and smokestacks, all in a variety of sizes. Mia thinks of all of the little structures as sculptures, like we are overlooking an industrial sculpture garden. In terms of city dwelling, it’s a fairly airy view, not quite an airshaft, yet not as quaint as a courtyard or garden. Mia sketches the angles of the buildings, their windows and alleyways, and aligns them all to their vanishing point.

The group of us fell in together with the rented studio, maybe unwillingly for some, the gravitational pull of a bird to a flock, like a family after a tragedy, a home base was enough to suck everyone in. At a home base, alone, we are able to look at one another. The building has
only three stories and is very old. We are on the second floor. The ceilings are average height and the doorjambs, the windows, were originally small but have since been enlarged. The wood floors are wide planks that have warped so the room goes uphill, or downhill. A dropped coin rolls towards the bathroom. Ellen feels like she’s in the hull of a ship, no ribs though, only white walls and a transom with two windows. For Martha, from Massachusetts, the wide plank floors give the place a touch of the old squat Puritan homes of witches and pewter pots hanging in hearths. Bethany puts geraniums on the dusty windowsill. Their stems look like dehydrated pieces of ginger. One window has a fire escape with a painted white grate that opens from the inside, like a door. When Jeanine looks at the white grate over the window, she imagines a nuthouse, or a prison, and romanticizes the idea that she is forever shut inside. The other window has a measly window-latch lock, and makes a number of us feel vulnerable and uneasy. When the weather is fair and someone like Kate brazenly opens the window, Meredith glances warily out to the airshaft. She looks down at the rooftop below. “We’re only one story up,” she says meekly. “Anyone could get up here and get in.”

A portion of ourselves is proud to live alone. We manage to pay the rent. We manage to take care of ourselves, alone. We’re not girls anymore, but we’re not really women yet. Or are we? We are like large girls, baby women, and we all agree that, as young women, or older girls, most men just don’t get it, just as we don’t get them. How could they? Men have forever carried a name from family to family, but never carry the babies. Men are injected with the right to innate confidence just by virtue of being male. When people read the same research paper written by someone name John, then written by
someone named Joan, everyone thinks John’s paper is better. Forget about the men, we say. For now, let’s just forget about them.

“But I like men,” says Daisy.

“We all like men,” says Sylvia. “Maybe too much.” Her headphones are still on, but clearly the music is off because she can hear us talking. Sylvia continues, “We’re just pointing out their advantages.”

“There are people far worse off than us,” says Mia, sketching with charcoal, a couple of smudges on her cheek.

“That’s true,” says Anna. “But that doesn’t make the female issue go away.”

“We have some advantages that men don’t have,” says Mia.

“Like what?” asks Anna. “Making less money so we have more grit?”

“We can be moms,” says Mia, hopefully.

“I don’t want to be a mom,” sighs Sylvia.

“I had an abortion,” says Meredith.

“So did I,” says Daisy. “Does that make us bad moms?”

“None of us are moms yet,” says Ellen, “and we might never be.”

“Most men just want you to be how they want you to be,” says Martha.

Mia asks, “Don’t most people want other people to be how they want them to be?”

“Not me,” says Kate. “I don’t care what other people do as long as they don’t judge me and I can steer clear of them if I need to. I had a boyfriend, a brother, and a father who were all similar in that they’d encourage me, ‘You are magnificent!’ But then they’d cancel that all out by asking, ‘Are you completely inept?’ But then my mother would do the same thing. People are people. But if we’re generalizing, I would agree that men are more
dismissive of women. And women are constantly apologizing. Sorry.” She laughs. “See? I didn’t even mean to say sorry.”

“I’m thinking,’ says Anna, “about how a man is never going to have an entire construction crew cat-call her and then applaud when she’s on her way to work.”

“Well that could be cute,” says Daisy, and we giggle.

“Are men as anxious about things like our door?” asks Samantha.

We all look at the door. It is true that most of us are concerned about someone breaking in. It doesn’t matter if it happens when no one is home; in fact, that did happen once: the grate on the window was laughably ajar when we returned from somewhere, the window wide open, the white curtain billowing dramatically into the room as if to say, ruffling, I saw it all happen! I saw it all happen! Nothing was taken. It is true that some of us have bad dreams at night where the main door won’t shut so that we can’t lock it properly with the two deadbolts, or the door isn’t there, or the door is flimsy, a cardboard-like joke of a door that we can’t believe the landlord thought would ever pass for an actual door, gaping around its edges so that even if it were locked it would be unstable and easily pushed down, punched through, or just folded over like a big piece of paper. Samantha, who likes to analyze dreams, tells us that we are dreaming about ourselves breaking into ourselves. Samantha reminds us that were are all made up of different parts of our person. We mostly look at her strangely because it might make some sort of sense but it’s not clear enough to resonate. Lydia, though, who loves to talk about herself, talks with Samantha for a long time about how her “door” might look.

Tilly wakes up one morning and tells us how, in her dream, our studio expanded. It wasn’t small like it is with only its main room, its sleeping nook, and bathroom. Instead,
Tilly dreamt that we had an entire downstairs with a large kitchen and a wide open upstairs, airy and loft-like. The rooftop out the window that’s one story below had become a garden with a big gunite pool, green grass and wildflowers and, beyond it, the ocean. We listen to Tilly describe the place, rapt, all of us, even Deidre who has a hard time ever washing her hair and brushing her dark bangs out of her eyes. Tilly is the one who had a boyfriend who beat her up. It happened when he drank too much but most of the time he never drank. She says it took her long enough to get drawn into this stinky studio and away from the boyfriend, and we all nod about all those other people who confused each of us, who were appealing and then pathetic and who we thought we could help—these troubled people who were pinching our arm, striking our face, pushing us over and insulting us but then also looking for us wherever we went, holding our hands—such strange forms of admiration that somehow encouraged us to do things we might never have done.

“Were people actually hurting you?” Samantha asks us. “Or are you all figuratively talking about yourself hurting yourself, pinching yourself, following yourself around?” We all stare at her, puzzled. “I guess it makes no difference,” Samantha shrugs. “If you’re in any situation that you’re free to remove yourself from, then you’re doing it to yourself.”

Her words confuse us with this talk of dreams, and of ourselves.

Meanwhile, outside is the real city. To the left, Chinatown, the big dragon’s at the Chinese New Year’s, the big lion heads, wriggling like giant worms up and down the street, bobbing playfully and maniacally. To the right, Little Italy, with pastries as delicate as the fingers of a hand model, a pale twig that can be snapped, or melted like an icicle, and then the heavy, buttery things that have rum and candied fruits as bright as costume jewelry. Stores on Mulberry Street and Elizabeth are standing to get very chic.
Sally makes money but spends more than she makes. She uses her credit card every time she doesn’t have enough cash. Sylvia borrows money and promptly pays it back. Daisy borrows money but still isn’t earning any so she doesn’t pay it back. Tanya works in Midtown and is gone all day. When she comes home in the summertime we can feel the cool aura of air conditioning emanating from her. If we reach into her bag, there are pockets of coolness still in there.

Tanya had a dog for a little while, which was a big pain in the ass because no one ever walked him and he barked all day while Tanya was at work; he just barked and barked as if we all weren’t sitting right there watching him do it. Only Emily, who acts like a child, liked having the dog around and would sleep all curled up with it but she was too lazy to walk it. Tanya eventually drove the dog to a farm outside the city to leave the dog there for good. She started to cry, but not because she was leaving the dog behind. She started to cry because the rolling hills and the green fields were so pretty that she didn’t want to go back to the city at all. Why was she living in a studio, alone, when the world was so large and green and fragrant? Two chestnut horses blazed across an alfalfa field and Tanya pulled over to watch. She was overcome by a feeling that made her gulp for air. She used to feel that way, unbridled and loving-the-run, the looseness of her body pulling her along. What happened? Why was she stuck where she was, working at place where every single female was someone’s subordinate and no one seemed to notice? Where men constantly interrupted the women, and if the woman said, *Excuse me, may I finish?*, everyone rolled their eyes thinking, *What a bitch!* Her own intern, on his first day, asked her to get him some coffee before she told him who she was.
What would become of her? We all thought this way - what will become of us? What is going to happen? We look at ourselves in the bathroom mirror, or in the little bedroom alcove one, bugging our eyes and opening our mouths in a silent scream. *Is that what I look like?* We catch glimpses of ourselves in a storefront’s glass or in the reflection of a ticket kiosk. *I thought I was shorter.* Or, *I thought I was larger.* Or, *I look so dowdy when I was imagining something childish.*

We were there, weren’t we? And there were times I think no one knew where we were. It might have been times that were A-Okay: no one knowing that, at that moment, we were doing yoga in the East Village in a dimly lit, groovy place, thinking of tropical beaches and tropical winds blowing gently and firmly, of escape, as we went upside down into Bridge pose, Shoulder Stand, squeezing our own torsos in twists, doing to our bodies what sex should have been doing to it but we were staying away from those other people who so confused and troubled us. Or no one knowing we were in a parking lot, or a park shaped like a triangle, in some picturesque town, the bushes low and glossy, afraid that someone was looking for us and he’s very drunk, the kind of drunk where he’s not stumbling and slurring but the kind of drunk where he’s moving quickly, very deliberately, strident and efficient, maybe with a knife in his hand. We are on the other side of the world.

The quiet studio is a crowd of us. Somewhere in the corner, maybe hiding behind the hanging clothes in the makeshift closet, there might as well be a toddler in a Florence Eismann dress hiding Oreos in her underwear so she can sneak them into the car. Out climbing on the fire escape, there might as well be the tomboy outfielder wearing cut-offs, short pigtails, not wearing a shirt. Perched on a pillow in the little alcove bed area is bookish Marie reading a biography of Helen Keller. On the couch, always on the couch, lies
Heather, like a sleeping depressed teenager. Does she have mono? A concussion? Natalia sits nearby smoking all the time. We either enjoy smelling Natalia’s smoke or despise it. One of us, Emily, thinks about her mother, who is dead, all of the time. All of the time her mother is still dead and always will be dead and she thinks mostly everyone wonders what will happen if we all die, and what’s the point, really, anyway, if we’re all just waiting to die and we’re all stuck with each other, waiting. A baby seems to be in here, crying from time to time. No one knows where it is. We don’t have diapers. We don’t have milk to feed it. If Adrienne were still here, she would be able to deal with it. Adrienne left a long time ago, fed up. “Losers!” she called back to us, over her shoulder, as she disappeared down the stairs.

We imagine what Adrienne would do.

“Well, first she’d find the baby,” says Nina sensibly. Nina is a very short person who looks a lot like Anne Frank.

“It’s the hot water heater,” says a brown-haired girl tartly. “It’s not a crying baby.” We all look at this brown-haired girl because no one knows where she’s come from. No one knows her name. We watch the girl take a long drag on her cigarette, then blow three tight rings in a row that we all watch wobble apart into the air.

“What hot water heater?” asks Joanie

The girl guffaws, exhales smoke sideways. “It’s what heats up the water, Dummy. It’s in here.” The hot water heater is in a vented closet next to our fridge. The girl opens the closet door, “See?” We look at the hot water heater. It’s tall and white, and, yes, wheezing a little bit in a way that can be construed as a crying infant.
Then we notice that Deidre is in there, in the partial dark at the back of the small
closet, squatting on the floor with her face in her hands. “Can I ever get a second to
myself?” Deidre squints up at us. “Ever?”

The unknown girl closes the closet door and the dark gets folded back in with it.

Joanie looks at the unknown girl’s angry face. “Who are you?” Joanie asks her.

The unknown girl laughs wildly. “Who are you?” she repeats, cackling loudly. Her
laughter trails off. “Oh that’s a good one,” she mutters. “That’s really good.”

We all wonder the same thing. Where did she come from? Where did we come
from? We have no idea where we are going. We all look away from the unknown girl. We
look at our hands, our fingernails. We tie our hair into knots on the top of our heads and
rub our lips together as we’re dispersing lip balm.

Finally, Nina says, “Well I’m still imagining what Adrienne would do about the
baby.”

The unknown girl speaks viciously over Nina’s words. “There is no fucking baby,”
she hisses. We all look at her. It is more than just the hissing words, she is terrifying. Her
breathing hisses. Her eyes slide from side to side. We all look to the main door, but it is
gone, which scares us.

A couple of us join Deidre in the hot water heater’s closet. Deidre sits with her
knees nestled into her eye sockets, hugging her shins. Leave me alone, leave me alone, she
mutters. We can’t see her face but the slash of light from the outside room cuts across
Deidre’s legs diagonally.

Instead of getting in the closet, the rest of us huddle in the alcove sleeping area to
commiserate. “The door can’t actually be gone,” says Samantha.
“Well, if it is, do we need to leave? We could climb down the fire escape.”

“Why are we scared of this girl?” asks Ellen. “She’s just like us.”

We watch the nameless girl throw fruit from the fruit bowl against the walls. Ripe mangoes splat like eggs. The honeydew sounds like skulls. In our abbreviated view, we can see colors-- orange, light green—splat against the wall.

Kate raises her eyebrows and smiles, “Just like us, huh?”

We laugh a little. “Someone check on Deidre. Those girls shouldn’t be in the closet.”

A few of us try to stop the mess making. “Have you lost your mind?” we ask her.

“What are you doing?”

The nameless girl doesn’t answer. She just picks up the rotten fruit that’s fallen on the floor and smears it on the wall. She starts to laugh.

“This is disgusting!” cries Samantha. “You don’t even live here and then you make this mess?”

“What’s wrong with you?” asks Tilly.

The unknown girl looks us all over, up and down. “What is wrong with you?” she asks. “It seems to me we’re all allowed in this place.” She sits down on the couch next to Heather and lets her head fall back. “Aren’t we all allowed in this place?” She closes her eyes. We see some tears leak out of her eyes and trail down the sides of her head. Her chest goes up and down because she’s gently crying, trying to catch her breath. She can’t hold it in so she puts her head in her hands and starts to sob.

We all watch her cry for a moment. A couple of us start to cry as well.
The brown-haired girl opens her eyes. “I’m so sick of feeling lonely,” she tells us. She starts to cry again.

“It’s okay,” says Molly.

“What’s wrong with me?” asks the girl. She sniffs, then cries some more.

“We understand,” says Emily.

Heather gets up from the couch, unfolds the blanket that overhangs its back, and puts it over the unknown girl. Joanie sits down next to the girl and strokes her head. Tilly fills up the hot water bottle that we have, wraps it in a Turkish towel, and places it in the unknown girl’s lap. Martha brushes her hair. Sylvia puts on some excellent music and unplugs her headphones so we can hear it through the boom box’s speakers. The music is hypnotic and soft, but also very clear and vivid, like forest and moss.

The nameless girl doesn’t look at all terrifying anymore. She looks familiar, like someone we’ve known forever but have never met. “Sometimes I feel great,” she tells us. “But sometimes I feel completely hopeless.”

We all nod. “We know,” says Tilly.

“We’re all right here,” says Lydia.

We help the unknown girl lie down on the couch. Heather pulls her blanket up. Tilly sits on the edge of the couch and says, “Shhh. We are all right here.”

“Thank you,” she sniffs. She kicks her shoes off. Her toenails are painted in gold polish.

“I like your toenail polish,” Natalia tells her. “You want a cigarette?”
“Thanks. No thanks.”

“How about some tea?” asks Anna. “Anyone want some tea?”

The sun is going down but since it’s cloudy, the air is darkening gradually without any pinks or oranges tinting the back rooftop.

“The light won’t turn on,” says Martha, snapping and unsnapping the lamp’s switch.

“I can see well enough to clean this crap up,” says Anna. She’s on her knees, cleaning up the smashed fruit. “Then I just want to go to sleep.”

“I’m sorry about the mess,” the nameless girl says softly. “I lost it. I just totally lost it.”

“Thanks for apologizing,” says Tanya. She is wiping the fruit smears off of the wall.

“I’ll help you guys,” says Deidre. We all look at Deidre because we rarely see her face without her hair in her eyes.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll help you guys too,” says Mia. “Then I want to draw while there’s enough light from the window. I also want to write down what we all just said.”

“What did we all just say?” asks Ellen.

“I don’t remember,” says Mia, “but once I write it down I might.”

Outside in the airshaft, the lavender light is grainy but sharpening, as if someone is adjusting the brightness and contrast. The pale sides of the buildings are periwinkle, light cornflower blue, and the rooftop that’s a floor beneath us, with its pipes and vents, looks far more interesting than usual. Of course there was that very interesting time, that one
day—that took place on the roof—Who was that girl? The fake looking one who just stared at us from the low roof out in the airshaft. For a long time, we all thought it was a small chimney, looking like a slender young woman wearing a hat, until one day, we saw her hair blow in the wind. We saw her brush the hair out of her face. We saw her walk away and disappear slowly down some stairs as if someone was guiding her in a trance. “Remember that chimney that was a girl?” asks Kate dreamily as we all look out at the airshaft and the rooftop. We all nod. We remember.

We all look out at the airshaft, the rooftop, and the cracked lines along the sides of the buildings, cracks in the cement that look a great deal like vines that have lost their leaves, or veins seeking new limbs.

The door opens and, of all people, it’s Adrienne, the one who called us all losers and left. She’s carrying a big canvas sack, like a laundry bag, and she plunks it on the floor in the middle of the room. We are atwitter at her arrival. What’s in the bag? How has Adrienne been?

“Oh would you all just shut up and look in the bag!”

The bag is full of dark, crackly vines that look like the ones that we can see on the side of the buildings. Some are coiled up, black and bristly. Some are broken into pieces. “Well this is strange,” says Sally. “This is a strange bunch of stuff that you brought!” We all stick our hands into the sack and pull out fistfuls of twigs and vines. Sally tosses a handful on the floor. The way a few vines have fallen, they look like they spell the word otter. “Look!” say Sally, pointing it out. We laugh, and, as we laugh, we imagine the word getting up, floating across the floor, and turning into an otter to slither playfully out the partly open window. We imagine that we are all standing at the window, watching the
creature slip into a large, natural pool of water. The otter’s head pops up like a seal’s, then disappears. Sunlight skitters across the water’s surface. We all start laughing because it’s like we are on a carnival ride, or in a dream. We are like Matryoshka dolls that can all stack into each other from laughing.

Joanie grabs some sticks, breaks them into smaller pieces, and then opens up the window grate on the other window. She opens the window itself and tosses the little stick pieces into the air. Some are picked up by the wind and they swirl a little, like seeds, and we imagine that they fall to the roof below, to its edges, and out of them come flowering vines, wisteria and hydrangea, luffing up around the edges of the buildings, thicker and thicker.

“Look at what’s been growing inside of us!” smiles Adrienne. We look at the vines. She means our imaginations. She means ourselves. We know what she means.

Tilly takes a long twig from the sack and makes it into a hoop, gets inside of it, and hula-hoops. Everyone’s gotten busy. Meredith is out on the fire escape, scratching words into the black paint on its railing. Mia is sketching an otter swimming through the water. The nameless girl is laughing, watching everyone. We imagine the building’s wall on the other side of the rooftop is like a movie screen with a mountain view that we’ve never seen, a field behind another field where the grass grows to the knees and maybe we’d worry about ticks. We are in a number of places in our different minds: a dingy motel room, a wet ditch, a brand new tree house where the lumber smells bad, and even hovering above the ocean, no human in sight but there’s a breaching whale collapsing sideways that seems to be spraying glee. All of these twiggy letters, these branchy words, acting like kindling, for such strange and mysterious impressions, of so much that can grow from within.
We look around at ourselves. Where did everyone go? Where? We are all right here together but we are filled up. We are filling up ourselves with everything we see, everything we will say. We look away from one another, but we are looking inward. There is a cliff and water at the bottom of it when we look down where water glistens with sunlight so brightly that it is blinding. We have different things to say about it, but all of us are ready. Some of us want to jump in. Some of us want to float on its surface. Some of us want to scoop the silvery sunlight up and paint it all over our skin. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we had no idea that our lives would grow so full and so terrifying. We had no idea that one day we would find ourselves with so much love.
Ms. Lisa tells me “Write it down, Maggie. Write it down.” I don’t know where to begin but she nudges me with a reminder that maybe I should think about the dogs. “So write about the dogs,” she tells me. I tell her I also think about you. “So then write about your mother, too.” It’s been a few years but I can go back to when I first arrived, which seems like a good enough place to begin.

I think of the dogs. I think of you. I think of me, and you, and dogs. Which thing comes first, I’m not sure. They kind of each overlap each other. I think of you and I think, Get me a bone and then pat my head so I can growl at you. When I growl, you should say “No,” firmly, and with authority. “No,” and I’ll look sidelong, away from your gaze, like I might bite you but I won’t because you’ve taught me not to use my mouth aggressively and because I’m a person, a girl, your daughter, not a dog, but I know that if I get too angry, if I misbehave, you will put me outside and leave me there, even in the rain, or the snow. Or, you will go out for a short errand, saying that you are going to get some Draino, and then never come back.
After you left, your jerk of an ex-boyfriend took care of me by taking me to Lincoln Middle School which was kind of a boring place but I liked Ms. Franklin and the iPad, and the chrome books, and getting away from your disgusting ex, Ronnie.

Disgusting Ronnie took care of me by making mac and cheese dinners for me but also by telling me to do favors for him that were against the law, even for a dog. He took pictures of me and he’d say, *Oh, it’s okay, Maggie, they’re only like the photos that your mom took that summer when you were swimming in the creek, in bathing suits and stuff. You were naked then, too, sometimes.*

But when you, Mom, took those pictures, I was younger, and you were still a vet. You still took care of all the animals. I remember, when I was really little, watching you stick your gloved arm into a brown and white cow, your face smiling, everything green around you. Your entire arm, up to your armpit, was inside the cow and you cocked your head slightly with an expression like you were trying to remember the tune to something. Then, pleased, you looked up, smiled, and told the farmer that the cow was perfect inside.

I was small but I remember asking you what perfect was in there, what perfect on the inside looked like, or maybe I asked you what it felt like. You kept smiling, raised your eyebrows at me, full of mischief with your cool wandering eye, your nice white teeth, your arm still inside of the cow up to your armpit, and laughed, “Keep wondering what perfect is, Maggie! Always wonder!”

That summer you took those pictures in the creek you were like a real mother, tickling me, holding my hand. The pictures were dark and dreamy, the water black as oil, and we were in nature. We’d lie on the blanket after we swam and watch the branches above us rub each other like fingers. When you took the pictures, your eyes would get so
quiet and focused and clear when you looked at me, when you figured out what pictures
to take, looking from the trees to my face to the water’s surface, that I felt like you were
me, and I was you, the crickets creaking hidden in the grass somewhere.

Pretty soon after that you didn’t even pretend that you weren’t taking all those
pills. You just took the dog pills, the horse pills, the cat stuff right in front of me, in the
morning, in the car, wherever. They rattled around in their little plastic jars in your
pocketbook. You got skinny and looked weird, like you were straining to carry something
that was too heavy to carry even when nothing was in your hands. The first time I saw
you giving yourself a shot in the arm you turned to me and said, *Oh hi, honey! I hurt
myself doing surgery on the horse. This shot will make me feel better.* Another time, in
the kitchen, you jabbed the needle into your leg like you were slapping a mosquito.

I remember these things mostly because I’ve tried to remember them. It’s not that
long ago, but long ago enough that I could’ve forgotten. Ms. Lisa says it’s important to
try to remember as much as I can. She says when you remember something you’re able to
shake it out like a t-shirt, look at it, smell it, and then either keep it, or get rid of it. If I
don’t remember it, it’ll just clog up my drawers, take up space and maybe even stink
everything else up if it’s a dirty item. At first I didn’t know what crazy she was talking
about, but lately I think I do. *Write it down*, says Ms. Lisa. I don’t want to shake out t-
shirty things that have anything to do with Ronnie. Once I bit him.

Anyway, after a while, when there was still no sign of you, Ronnie told me that
you joined the army, that you were fighting in the war.

I would have asked him, “What war?”*, but at the time I didn’t like to talk. I
preferred to read, mostly about dogs, or write, and look at maps. Though for a second I
imagined that maybe you were a veterinarian again, taking care of, or training, those soldier dogs, those German Shepherd bomb sniffers that I’d read about on the dog training websites. But I knew. I knew you were just crazy, gone out of control, and I hoped you weren’t dead.

I thought of running away, to the woods- I’d read all the dog books: *Old Yeller, Sounder, Where the Red Fern Grows, and Because of Winn Dixie-* but I didn’t have a plan, I didn’t have a dog, and I didn’t know this new town well enough to know where to go. The map of the woods near the middle school looked confusing and the woods looked weird and thick. Instead, I’d stay late at school, hiding. Mrs. Franklin found me on the stage in the auditorium, reading, encircled by the velvet curtains. I’d left a crack in them for some light, and to keep a lookout for anyone coming down the aisle. When she pulled the curtain back to find me, she was particularly cross, frowning at me with her arms folded at her chest. Her hair and her face looked like an Irish Setter’s. “Maggie,” she said, “why on earth haven’t you gone home?” So I told her. I told her that you weren’t around anymore and why I didn’t want to go back to that crummy apartment. I thought she was going to get angrier. I thought she was going to call me a liar. Instead, her eyes welled up. Her chin started to quiver. “Such a dear, smart girl,” she said. She took my hand, brought me to the main office, and I never had to see that man again.

While my social worker, Phyllis, was tracking down your mother, my grandmother, I lived for a few weeks with dentists. The mother and father, Ms. Susan and I-never-knew-his-name, were both dentists. Their countertops, their floors, the chairs to their dining room table, all looked like they were wet with some glossy oil that made me
think of teeth, trying to be shiny. The mother, Ms. Susan, whose hair also looked thick and shiny, washed my clothes. My jacket still looked dirty, even after it was clean. She washed it again and it still looked dirty. The dentists had five children. They came and went and I only really registered one of them, a daughter who wore cheerleader outfits. The big pom-poms were something that a dog would go crazy over, wanting to tear them apart. While the mother was waiting at the bus stop with me one morning she told me that she had some exciting news. She said that my grandmother would be coming to get me. I looked at the dentist’s face directly. She had a very large nose. One of her eyes was a different color than the other. Her hair was the color of the wet, brown tree trunks behind her. Tiny bright green buds on the trees were little puffs all over the place. It wasn’t raining or drizzling, but it was misting.

“I don’t have a grandmother,” I told her, even though Phyllis had mentioned it, and I remembered you telling me. A car whizzed by and zippered through a dark puddle next to us.

“You sure do,” the dentist replied brightly. She smiled at me. The mist had formed tiny droplets, like ice, along her hairline. “I’m glad to hear your voice,” she said. At the time, like I’ve already said, I didn’t talk much. I preferred to read, or write, and look at maps.

I thought I’d never met your mother, but, as you know, we’d been to her house together when I was a baby, when I was little, more than once. I’ve seen the pictures. There’s one picture on your mother’s mantel of me at, like, three, holding a tan puppy on her front lawn. You’re squatting down next to me in a yellow sundress, a daisy behind
your ear. You look happy, and pretty, and healthy. Once you started the drugs, though, once you started using- that’s what Phyllis called it, using, using, using- it’s what Ms. Lisa calls it too- once you started using you’d tell me that my grandmother had lots of money and that she was hoarding it, keeping it from us because she was a greedy person who didn’t care about anyone except herself, and her money. Do you remember that? My grandmother, you would tell me, was such a greedy person that she didn’t exist. But if she did exist, you and me would love her, you said, because we love all people, especially family. But you made it clear that my grandmother, your mother, didn’t exist, because she was greedy with her money, and narrow-minded, and that’s not how families should be.

Your mother arrived at the dentist house, far shorter than I pictured her. I remember I was hoping she’d be well-groomed, tall and regal like a queen. I don’t know why I hoped that because I never liked the princesses and the queens. My favorite person, up until that time, might have been, well, you, before you got hooked. I liked my second grade teacher Mrs. Hannon. You liked her too. You brought her tomatoes from our garden. We had a garden! Even though I didn’t have her for very long at Lincoln Middle School, I did like Mrs. Franklin a lot. Not just because she saved me from Ronnie, but also because she gave me a different book to look at almost every day. She had two or three different pairs of eyeglasses on chains around her neck- one for reading, one for distance, and a pink pair for everything else. She’d let me look at her giant Encyclopedia of Dogs when I was done with my work. I also looked at her World Atlas. The lines of the maps, the shapes of the continents, always made me think of bones, and veins, like they were sketches of parts of people’s bodies. I’d think of people lying down, a hip bone
jutting out, a jawline, noses. It sounds freaky and scary but it made me feel good to think of figures in the ground, figures as the earth, pushing their parts up from below, maybe holding us, maybe trying to bury their head behind a mountain.

In the *Encyclopedia of Dogs*, I’d read all about the breeds. I already knew a lot, but it’s so endless, the dogs and their information. Did you know that in the old royal days, maybe you already know this, the King Charles Cavalier spaniels— to me, they look like girls with smushed in noses and long pigtails, kind of like how I used to look— were brought into beds? They were like bed warmers but they’d also attract fleas so the fleas would bite them instead of the people. Labradors will eat anything they can get into their mouths. A beagle, once they get the scent of something, will run after the smell, get completely caught up in the tracking, and can easily get lost. Rottweilers are super protective. The smartest dogs are the border collies.

Anyway, your mother was coming to get me. The dentists’ electronic doorbell rang. The dentist opened the door and there was your mother, squat like a thumb, in blue jeans and a light blue windbreaker, squinting. “Maggie? Is that you?” Her hair was white. Standing beside her, almost as tall as she was, was a black dog, not even on a leash. I knew from the *Encyclopedia of Dogs* that the big black dog was a Giant Schnauzer, a common breed in Germany.

“My, that’s some dog,” the mother dentist said. “Very large!”

“This is Herbert,” your mother said. “And I am your granny.” Her voice was deep, like my gym teacher’s, and she spoke quickly. “Maggie, do you like dogs?”

I nodded.
“Good. If you’re afraid,” your mother told me, “pretend you’re not. Push your chest out. Stand tall. Herbert will sense your authority. Or at least your effort.”

I stood as tall as I could. I put my hand out and Herbert licked it. His tongue was pink with bluish speckles.

“We are leaving Massachusetts,” your mother announced once we were in her truck. “We are driving to Vermont.” I pictured the state, long like a horse’s nose. “It’s just me,” your mother said, the truck lurching onto the main road. “Your grandfather died before you were born.” I looked around the cab. Things were ship shape. A silver medal hung from the rearview mirror next to a purple air freshener in the shape of a pine tree. In the narrow back seat, Herbert slept on a red and black plaid blanket. Your mother turned on the heat. A talk radio show was discussing meatloaf recipes. My eyes were suddenly very heavy. My body drooped. I rested my head on the seatbelt and your mother balled up a scarf that was in her lap. “Here,” she said, and tossed it to me. “Use this for a pillow.”

I wadded it up and tucked it into the crook of my neck. It smelled like a fireplace. Before I closed my eyes, I looked back at Herbert. He cracked open an eye, winked at me, then shut it.

When the truck came to a stop, I woke up. “Here we are,” said your mother. In front of us, in a large fenced in area, about ten dogs were wagging their tails, barking at us, snuffing their noses up into the air. Beyond them was a gray sky and low mountains that look like slightly bent knees. “I don’t like keeping them fenced in,” she said, not
really talking to me. “But Miranda follows the truck and then everyone else, well, most of them, end up following her.”

Your mother got out and opened the back door for Herbert. He bounded out and ran to a tree where he whizzed with his leg up, then ran around in a few crazy eights. Your mother opened the gate and the dogs scurried out and wiggled around her. A couple of them jumped entirely off the ground. Some of them were brown, the color of mud. Others were tan, black, or mottled white. “Well hello, everyone!” said your mother.

I sat inside the truck and watched them like I was watching that drive-in movie you took me to once. Do you remember that? The sound didn’t work and then the picture froze on a woman starting to open an umbrella. You were asleep and when I woke you up you looked at me drearily, but smiling, and said, “What is it, Cat?” I had no idea who “Cat” was. Who is Cat?

I watched your mother greet the dogs. She smiled at them. When she turned her back to me, her outline, her shape, looked like yours if you had thickened and put on a wig of white hair. With her back to me, it looked like you wearing a costume, or like she was wearing a costume of you, and if she turned around it would be your face under that white-haired wig.

What was going to happen? I had no idea what to expect. I had no idea if your mother was anything like you. Other than this costume resemblance and believing what Phyllis said, I had no idea that this woman was even your mother at all. I looked around. There was a little bit of skid-marked snow at the edge of the driveway. Behind me, beyond a tidy shingled house with purple pansies in a pot on a small porch, the view of
the mountains was larger. One peak still had snow on it and looked like a creamsicle in the setting sun.

Your mother opened my door. “Come and meet some dogs,” she said. I stepped into the mud and I felt it sink through to my sock. “Remember, stand tall and they’ll respect you.” I walked towards the three that were roaming freely outside the gate. One of them, a golden one, was panting a big smile, wagging. I sat down on a rock and started to pat it. A shiny dog that looked like a Doberman started barking angrily at me from behind the fence. “That’s enough, Walter,” your mother chided, and closed the gate. “That’s enough.”

The golden dog that I was patting sat down, making itself comfortable, and leaned against my leg. Another dog, a gray Pitbull with green eyes, came over to us and leaned against my other leg. It leaned in a little further and I could feel its bulk against my side, against my hip.

“That’s Sybil,” my grandmother told me. “And his name is Pickle.” I wanted to point out that their names almost rhymed, but I didn’t speak yet. Their animal weight, their warmth against my body, their smiling mouths as they panted happily, it all made my throat close up and my eyeballs grow warm and watery. How did the world know that all I wanted was to have lots of dogs around?

Even before you started all of the drugs, I thought a lot about animals, mostly about dogs and cats. You were a veterinarian! Probably the coolest job a mom could have! I mean I mentioned already the time from back when you were practicing in the country, when I was littler, with your arm stuck up into that cow, saying it was perfect. I
swear I can right now practically picture you then, examining that cow, your arm shoved into it, and then lifting it up, the cow, off of the ground like some giant bumper and just carrying on with your life: bring me home but with a cow on our arm. Going to deliver a colt, but with a cow on your arm because your arm was cushioned in some weird velveteen organ jewel box of perfection. How do I get in there?

You always promised me we’d get a dog, or a cat, or both, once we settled down someplace. The animals we fostered were better than nothing. I still miss Mrs. Gray. For a long time after she was gone- where did she go? - I would pretend that she was in the next room. I’d close my eyes and imagine she was sleeping at the foot of my bed, or on the floor. Can a gray shepherd dog seem to hold regularity and normalcy together? Mrs. Gray did! Plus, her eyes looked at me like someone I know but have never met. She had this expression where she looked at you like she loved you, but she doubted you were doing the best that you could. Mrs. Gray expected more.

Do you remember when I came with you to work that time? You were working at that animal shelter where no one knew you. It was the summer, around the fourth of July, so no one else was there. I was nine. It was the last job you had. They fired you pretty soon after that, I realize now because you were stealing drugs. The shelter smelled like flea collars, antiseptic, and the stale, mellowed smell of dog. You gave me the job of taking the friendly, smaller dogs out for short walks. Some of them, the moment they got out the front door, would lie down on the front walkway, looking pleased, sniffing all the new smells. There was a litter of black and brown puppies. You let me watch over them in their little room and clean out their crate. When I was going to get the puppies some food, I passed the operating room, and I saw you in there, holding a mask over your nose
and mouth. I could hear you inhaling it, whatever was inside the mask, gulping, with sounds that were like the reverse of laughter.

At the end of the day, when I was watching your hand lock the padlock to the building’s front door, I asked you who would watch over everyone during the night.

You laughed. “They’re on their own until morning, Maggie, and they’ll do just fine!”

I thought of the puppies we’d left crawling around on top of each other in their crate, pooping and peeing and then sleeping in it. I thought of the little old Jack Russell mutt, Clover, with the fogged over, smoky eyeballs, who kept shivering even when I was patting her on my lap. I wished I’d put more bedding and towels down for her so she could maybe get warm and stop shaking. I thought of Colonel, the bloodhound with the short legs. “What if his collar gets caught on the metal again?”

“I took his collar off,” you said. You unlocked the car so we could get in. It was the same car that, eventually, you left in. Poof, as if you and the car just vaporized.

“Will they be scared?” I asked.

You shrugged. “Maybe,” you said, getting into your seat. “But at least they have each other.”

As we drove, I felt cold. I got small in the front seat. I know I should be in the back, because I’m small, but you don’t notice. I looked over your profile. Your nostrils flared every once in a while like a pony’s. I thought of seeing you earlier in the operating room with that mask over your face. I felt like I was shrinking, getting smaller and smaller. I felt curled up, like a tire, like all of those dogs trying to get warm. I asked you, “What were you doing with that mask over your face?”
You turned to look at me and held your gaze, smiling wildly, when your eyes should have been on the road.

I barked at you, and the smile remained plastered on your face. I barked at you again, with a series of barks, like alerts, and you laughed. You laughed and laughed so hard that you squeezed the horn on the steering wheel and the horn kept honking not so much like a horn but as a long bleating, screeching note as we flew along the highway. I kept barking and started to cry.

I leaned on Sybil, the Pitbull, who had been leaning against me. Her head was as solid as a doorstop, encased in velvet. She looked up at me, her ears back. Her green eyes were like a cat’s. When I looked at them very closely, their surface rippled like a topographic map, almost with flecks of gold along the topographic lines. Your mother walked over to us. “They can smell that you are family,” she said. “They lead their lives with their nose.” As if on cue, Sybil rested her chin on my thigh resignedly. “She knows how you feel,” said your mother, patting Sybil’s head. “The dogs always know.” Your mother patted my head. It was the first time that she touched me. “Follow me,” she said.

I followed her into the house. Two little dachshund mixes, and a caramel corgi, greeted us at the door. Next to the front door was a washer and dryer on a stone floor. Then there was a little room with two upholstered chairs with blankets that looked like they were stuck to them and, on the floor, some dog beds all covered in dog hair. I followed her to a stairway but could see an open living room with a wood stove, a few couches, and a big window, as we passed. Upstairs, down a skinny hallway, she led me to a little room painted light blue with a slanted ceiling. On the twin bed, on a white
bedspread, there was a cat, coiled in a gray circle, sleeping. It looked up at us. Beside the
cat, there were flannel pajamas, navy blue and white plaid, laid out like they were waiting
for a person to get inside them. Right in the middle of their torso, something stirred, and
the face of another cat appeared, its white nose and whiskers. “Mary,” my grandmother
said, addressing the cat, “you found a nice spot to sleep.” The cat looked up at her,
twitched an ear back, flicked her tail. I still hadn’t looked at my grandmother’s face
directly.

Mary meowed at me. So did the other cat.

My grandmother motioned to the dresser. “There are some other clothes.” There
were a few folded items on top of it. “I’ll make you some food. Spaghetti? There’s a
shower across the hall. Take your time. I’ll be downstairs.”

I was alone with the two cats. I sat down on the bed. Mary meowed again. The
other cat started purring loudly. I scratched it on the side of its neck and it closed its eyes
and leaned its head in, purring. On the wall was a picture of a girl. It was you, feeding a
lamb with a bottle. On a slim shelf above the bed was a small worn white book that had
handwriting in black Sharpie on the spine: My Cats and Other Animals by Maggie
Bishop.

My name is Maggie Bishop. I live in Vermont with my mother and my father. We have
black cats. We have dogs too, three sheep, a cow, and we have a horse that we don’t own
but that boards here and belongs to the Goddards. The Goddards only come here in the
summertime and at Christmas and sometimes to ski. They have a big house with a pond
that I skate on sometimes. Right now I’m going to write about my cats.
Wooder is the famous cat. She is a diva. If this were a tv show, she would be the star of the soap opera. She might walk into a room, see you sitting on the couch or at the sink, and meow at you, or purr. Or, she might walk into the room, hiss at you, and leave. She’s fuzzier than the others. She is a black cat, but in the summertime, she gets a little brown. On the very tip of her duster tail is a wisp of white. Now that she’s older she has speckles of gray on one side of her face. She has started to have seizures. She foams a little at her mouth, curls up, and, biting onto one of her back paws, turns in circles until the seizure is over.

The puppy’s name is hard to pronounce. Its name is Penobscot, after the Penobscot Bay and the Penobscot River, which are named for the Native American tribe.

Outside, a flurry of barks. I could hear your mother laughing downstairs. A door creaked open, and then a couple of barks inside the house. There was a good cooking smell. A small, wiry dog appeared in my doorway and one of the cats flattened her ears, looking at him warily. From downstairs, your mother called the dog and he darted away. I lay down on the bed, curled around the cats so I wouldn’t disturb them, and let my head sink into the pillow. As I pulled up some covers, the cats, unmoving, watched me with great interest. Once I was settled, they softly closed their eyes, their heads remaining upright.

I turned off the light next to the bed and Mary started to purr louder. The rectangular window in the slanted ceiling was a diamond of bright indigo. I could see a
star in its corner, like a flag. You had slept here. Was this what you looked at? When did your mother get so many dogs? This woman is your mother? I have nightmares sometimes where I hear you calling me, from a porch in the dark, like you’re calling a dog. “Maggie! Maggie!” Once I start listening to your voice, though, my feet are on the porch, and I’m the one yelling. I’m the one calling to you, calling you home. Three times I’ve dreamt that the same dog – a cute little bordie collie – came bounding towards me, out of the night, and was so happy to see me that it kept licking my hands and nudging me with its nose, whinnying.

I heard your mother coming up the stairs. I quickly closed my eyes and started breathing heavily and deeply, slowly like I was asleep. I didn’t want dinner. There was a dog or two with her, I could hear their nails clicking along the floor and their sniffing as they approached. When your mother got closer, she slowed down. She dimmed the light in the hall. One of the dogs mewedled softly next to her, probably a yawn. I felt her pat the cat.

It was quiet. I could sense your mother was in the doorway, standing there. There was the sound of one of the dogs collapsing onto the floor to relax. I opened my eyes in the dark; my back was too her. On the wall, in the dusky light, was the picture of you giving the lamb a bottle. Behind me, your mother whispered my name, “Maggie,” she said, very softly, but not like she was asking me if I was asleep. It was more like she was talking to me. The dog at her feet rustled a bit, getting comfortable. “I didn’t know,” your mother whispered. “I didn’t know that your needed me.”

I closed my eyes again. My throat felt warm like a small sunset was in it, or a small sunrise, and like I might choke. I could see it in my head, a sun setting over a
horizon but rising on the other side, their blush and glow like the two are holding hands, hovering over a start and an end. I thought of you with your arm in the cow, and maybe that’s what the wonder inside of it looked like.

Downstairs, there was a howl bark of an old dog. Which one was it? Did I know it? I thought of Sybil with the green eyes, looking at me, her eyes shining like something inside of her was making her eyes glow into my own. I imagined myself running into the night, carrying the wonder in that body, taking it into the woods. Let it run with a stick in its mouth. Let it dig up a hydrangea bush, sprint back and forth across the yard, and then lie sideways in front of a crackling fire, its legs twitching in dreams.
Ok, ok. Hurry backstage! Back to the kids. It’s my job to get the blood squirting in time when the kids get stabbed. Was I spacing out? Did I miss it? Did Brianna yell at me again to hurry upstage? No. I think I’m on top of it. I’m where I should be.

“Louise!” Brianna shouts for me. She’s very dramatic. She’s very curt and tight. I’ve learned that most of these stage people are, for the most part, and since this is probably their fourth or fifth studio class they’ve had time to hone in on it. Or is it home in on it? Or even, horn in? You’d think by now as an English major I’d know the difference. “Louise?” Brianna screams my name again. “Do you have the blood back there? Is it sufficiently red this time?” It’s true that the last batch of “blood” I’d prepared was watery and colorless. I did put some red dye in the squirt tubes but it was organic and weak in color. This time I’ve got standard food dye from Walgreen’s. Might be too red, which is a concern because we want the blood to look real. Brianna’s literally screaming. “Louise! Can you hear me? You got the stuff?”

“Yes,” I tell her.
“Ok well this time we want it red, but not too red like a fire engine. We want it really like blood, ya?”

“Got it,” I tell her, the same way my teenage brother says it to our mom. I wonder for a second how Brianna talks to her mom. Brianna’s a senior, a double major in Dance and Drama, and she’s, like I already said, very curt and tight but then when she dances that tightness is still there but it’s like what’s in a wind-up doll, or a music-box, or a clock, all taught and restrained, and watching her makes you feel nicely tense and alert since you can somehow feel all of the energy inside of her, loaded like springs, that she’s holding inside as she glides around in fluid spins and soaring jumps.

As an English major with a concentration in Poetry, I’m required to take this Studio class. All of the Creative Arts majors are required to take it. Our professor, Professor Jan, is a spritely little woman whose focus is Installation Art. One of her most famous pieces was called “Areola”, which featured replicas of women’s breasts, specifically a nipple, camouflaged in various installations. My favorite one, from the pictures I’ve seen, is a bunch of pretend Baltimore Orioles placed tightly side by side in a circle, forming like a pinwheel, and their beaks and their orange necks at the center of the wheel look like a nipple. The title is “Auriole”. Ha! Professor Jan is close to eighty years old but she has a boyish-shaped head with a pixie cut and reminds me of Peter Pan. We hardly see her since it’s a collaborative class. She stops in every once in a while, raises her eyebrows as if she’s impressed, and then leaves. When she does talk, she sounds like my first therapist. She just says the stuff back to you that you said to her in the first place. Like if Brianna might say, “We’re going to have the Chorus dressed like horsey suburban moms with riding boots and leggings and those quilted barn jackets.” Professor Jan’s
response would be, “I see,” nodding, “so the Chorus will be wearing suburban mom
clothes…”

Or Brianna might mention to Professor Jan, “we’re not really sure how to
incorporate music yet,” since music is a requirement in the collaboration.” Professor Jan
might look a puzzled as Brianna and say, “Hmmm. You’re not sure how to get the music
in there.”

The class is called “Studio Collaboration” and I guess the twelve of us could have
collaborated on some kind of an art exhibit or a long poem or something but since we
have a bunch of these drama people and stage crew types who all know each other we
got with a riff on the Medea myth, specifically Euripides’ play. Since we’re at an all-
female college, and Greek Mythology is a requirement in our first semester, we’ve all
read the Euripides play at one point or another. We toyed with the idea of doing
something with “The Yellow Wallpaper” since we’d all read that one too, and since one
of our requirements was to involve a piece of literature, but we had a hard time agreeing
on what to do. Two painters, Marcy and Olive, were adamant about painting the actual
freaky yellow wallpaper in different styles and then suggested the rest of us all write
corresponding prose paragraphs to go with the paintings and then we’d exhibit them in
the underpass on the way to the dining hall. No one wanted to write stuff. I didn’t
say much about it. It’s still hard to speak sometimes, even when I want to. It’s like my words
get crowded up in the back of my chest, between my shoulder blades in the deep of my
throat, and then they splinter into bits all around my head and I’m left with this scary
feeling that things aren’t real, or I’m here but I’m not here, or something terrible is going
to happen. It’s like the moment that I’m in, the moment that was happening, got punched in the gut and had its wind knocked out.

“Medea” was at least something that everyone could get involved in since it has actual roles. Plus, there’s drama in Medea’s general myth even before she kills her kids. Medea is a witchy sorceress princess who leaves her “barbarian” homeland with Jason after she helps him get the golden fleece. They’re in love, or, maybe Medea is using Jason because he’s kind of a dolt and she’s really smart and he does everything she says. Anyway, Medea kills her brother as they’re fleeing her father (a king), which pretty much burns her bridges at home. She has two kids with Jason. The Euripides play that we’ve all read starts with Medea in Corinth where she, Jason, and their kids have been living a happy little life but Jason has just announced that he’s taken another wife (a princess, the daughter of the king!). Medea is so pissed maybe because she loves Jason and feels completely betrayed but I don’t think she loved him that much it’s more that she’s totally distressed because she can’t go home, and if she sticks around for Jason’s new marriage her kids will be treated badly by a royal stepmother family, maybe even be killed, and Medea, as an outsider from the barbarian place, will lose her position in her Greek world. She can no longer control any little aspect of her life because Jason is just up and doing whatever he wants! No fair, no fair. So, first she kills the princess, then the princess’ dad, then she kills her kids basically because she sees no other way out for them. What else could she do? But then what’s weird is that she doesn’t kill herself. The play ends with her soaring above the stage in a golden chariot that belongs to her grandfather, the Sun. This confuses me. On the one hand, I can feel victorious for her. Power! On the other, she stabbed her kids. Awful. But then again, she couldn’t just run away with her kids
somewhere safe. Or could she? I guess she just couldn’t because that’s how stuck women were in ancient Greece. She had no more agency. “Agency” is the word professors use all the time for choice and power combined. She has no more choice, and no more power, so she just becomes terrifying.

Brianna volunteered to be the director since she’s choreographed some dance performances. Sally and Nia are the two kids that Medea kills that I squirt the blood all over. Alicia is Medea’s husband, Jason. A severe looking girl, Jasmine, is Medea because she played the part once and knows all the lines, even though our version of the play is a sort of abbreviated thing that we’ll perform at the end of the semester. Four other girls do the Chorus. A girl named Suzette is the princess and another girl, Dora, is the king of Colchis. Who am I forgetting? Nurse is played by one of the girls, Alix, who’s in the Chorus.

Since I’m only an English major, and not very outspoken, I was given the job of props. There are hardly any props, except for when the kids get murdered and when the princess gets murdered, and I guess also when the brother gets dismembered. The prop department already had a crown and a kind of robe thingy that we’re using for when Medea poisons the stuff to kill the princess. I guess there’s also the job of moving chairs on and off the stage, that kind of thing. Nia helps me with some of that. She’s quiet like me, and when the time comes we’ll dress all in black so we don’t look loud on stage.

What I mostly do is watch all the girls do their thing while we’re rehearsing and then I daydream, mostly about Medea’s life. What a weird life! The thing that’s weird about stories, about the ancient ones, is that they’re, like, vague enough that you can make up stuff around them. What I wish is that my brain could take a photograph of something
that I’m thinking and could just keep the picture. That’s why I used to write poems. Because they were like a snapshot. Like if I was looking at a tree, I’d snapshot it in my head and then write down what it looks like, and it’d be a poem. Lately, I’ve hardly been writing any poems and it’s a problem, because it’s my minor. I’ve been thinking about things more with words instead of pictures, but then those words get all clustered up, like I said before, at the back of my chest and then they break apart into that empty, socked-in-the-stomach place where everything is sort of empty and full at the same time, very very precise and weird, but sometimes all the items and things within the space that I’m looking at- my yellow pencil, say, with its hexagonal sides like a tubed building block cell to a honeycomb, the words within the pencil, the words within a stack of hexagonal honeycombs oozing honey- what would a honecomb say with a pencil if it could write something down?- sometimes the things that I’m looking at, all drained of everyday-ness normalcy, they come to shimmer like someone’s dappled them with little bleats of possibility.

I’ve been thinking of Medea’s birthplace island like an island that my mom took me and my brother to in Maine once to see puffins. My brother was obsessed with seabirds at the time and mom sort of framed our vacation around his interest. The island I’m thinking of wasn’t the puffin island but an island nearby that had only a tree or two because it was so windy and unsheltered and was just a few humps of grassy areas that sloped down to big rocks and then the dark blue water that swirled in foamy, mounding swaths and crashes of foam. The guy who drove us to the puffin island drove us to the island that I’m thinking of and its small beaches were covered in smooth stones that were the same color as the color of the seals that we saw sunbathing on the rocks. They were
so cute- little shiny blobs. Why do some of them look like they’re balancing on their little tummies, with their head up and their tail sticking out behind them like they’re doing a leg lift? I think because they’re drying off. But here’s what I’ve been picturing about Medea getting born. We don’t know much about her mother. At least when I google it, nothing really comes up. Might have been Hecate, or maybe an Oceanid named Idyia.

So here’s what I picture about her being born: She’s born on a grassy hill like the island I’m talking about, a place where later she will eat blackberries and blue fish and wild carrot and sweet peas, waves crashing loudly below. She crawls out of her mother, who’s a giant, on thick baby arms and thighs, smiling toothless, yanking up grass. The fuzz of her hair is matted with that birth gunk, and she’s got that greasy looking stuff all over her. She glows a little bit around the edges of her ears maybe only because the sun is shining through them but also maybe because she *is* related to the sun. (He is her grandfather!) She yanks up the windy grass and then sticks it in her mouth like how babies do, then speed-crawls around and tips back on her butt to sit. The umbilical cord is still attached to her bellybutton and it leads like a thick hose back to her mom, who happens to be a small giant who’s almost unconscious, lying in the grass and, like, groaning. Medea the baby toddler crawls back to her mom and then suckles her big breast- the size of the stump of a big tree. She glances around as she nurses, her little nostrils flaring. She gulps. The wind lifts the tiny tufts of her bloody hair. That’s when it jumps on her. It’s an invisible cape that will restrict her for her whole life long since she’s a female. It’s kind of like a tube that will hold her to a certain direction and path with her obligations and supplications as a woman. It’s like she’s stuck in a woman tube that’ll
make her become manipulative and calculating so she can get what she wants and needs, all within the confining transparent tube that she’s stuck in for her whole life.

When I suggested to the girls, “Maybe we should start with Medea being born,” I probably sounded hesitant. My mom says I sound unsure of myself when I speak so softly, even when she knows I’m confident inside. I continued. “The tube she’s in could be the center of the play.” My suggestion was met with strange looks. I wondered how to explain my tube idea like maybe if we had a cape or something on her, or some kind of character alongside her, or, if, say, her hands were literally tied, or something, to work as a symbol. I muttered, “Medea’s hands could be tied behind her back.”

The girls all looked at me, tired. Then Jasmine (Medea) winced as if someone just put a freezing cold hand on the back of her neck, under the warmth of her hair. “You obviously don’t understand the play, Louise,” said Jasmine, frowning. “How’s she going to stab her kids if her hands are tied?” Jasmine, for an actress, has a very strange habit of never looking you in the eye. She looks down at the ground, to the right, or left, of your feet, or up to the left, or the right, above your head.

“It’s okay, Louise,” Brianna said quickly. “We’re always happy to hear suggestions. Right everyone?”

The girls bobbed their heads around, Jasmine looking severe and uneasy, and then Brianna continued with her “dance” that was supposed to symbolize the part of the story where Medea’s herbs make the dragon fall asleep so Jason can get the golden fleece.

“Louise?” Brianna’s head pokes back around the curtain. “Do you have the basket of the body parts?”
“Yes” I tell her, and point to my collection of prop stuff that’s against the wall. I’d wrapped pieces of felt in duct tape and then wrapped all the heavy duct tape in tannish brown felt again to make lumpy items that look like arms and limbs. In the myth, when Medea and Jason are running away in the Argonaut boat, Medea’s father (a king) comes after them. Medea and Jason cut up Medea’s brother into pieces and then chuck his body parts overboard so that her dad (the king) has to slowly find all the pieces of his son that are floating around in the ocean so that he can give him a decent burial. In the meantime, Medea and Jason sail away while their pursuers (the king etc) are waylaid. I got the felt from an art supply store near Chinatown and actually stole the duct tape from our dorm’s super. He’d left a bunch of his supplies in the stairwell in a caddy. He had three duct tapes, and I figured my mom’s paying the college enough money that a duct tape roll isn’t a big deal for me to take. While I was making Medea’s brother’s limbs, my roommate Dana kept sighing really loudly in her bed. I knew why. It was because as I unrolled the duct tape, and tore it, I was making a lot of noise, and she was trying to sleep. I tried to ignore her annoyance so I could get the job done but finally, when she said, really nicely, “Louise, I’m glad you’re so into this project that you’re making stuff at midnight, but I have an Economics test in the morning and really need my sleep.” Dana has a brother with an anxiety disorder so she’s really patient with me.

I said, “Sorry, Dana,” and took a picture of the pile of limbs I’d made, sent it to Brianna, who texted me back with a thumbs up emoji. Then I went to the Twitter account of my father’s new girlfriend, a French actress. I check it kind of compulsively. She doesn’t say much on it, just posts pictures of herself. I haven’t seen my father since he moved to France ten years ago. I wonder if this actress girlfriend even knows me and my
brother exist. Then I go to google maps and peer down at my father’s apartment on Rue de Picpus. There are four windows, on the fifth floor that I look at for a while. Then I scroll a little north, like a bird, and hover over the Place de La Nation which is a circle of green park, with a sculpture, The Triumph of the Republic, in the middle of it. From the round park, equidistant boulevards and avenues branch off like spokes in a wheel. In bird’s-eye view, The Place de La Nation, with its sculpture poking up in the center of its green circle, looks like one of Professor Jan’s aureole nipples. I imagine my Dad walking around the park. I think he has a little dog. I’ve looked up pictures of the sculpture and the focal point is a woman, Wikipedia said her name is Marianne, who is the Republic, barefoot, standing on a chariot being pulled by two lions. There’s lots going on below her: there’s a blacksmith and kids and other women who apparently symbolize Justice, Abundance, and the spirit of Liberty. I think of my dad walking his little dog around the circle of the park. I’m thinking he doesn’t look at those women and think of me, or my mom. I sometimes pretend that I think he thinks of me, but I’m not a fool who’s going to go mooning after a father on the other side of the ocean.

When I was younger I’d sometimes call my dad and listen to him say, “Hello? Hello? Louise? Is this you?” but then his number changed and I never asked my mom what the new one was. He wasn’t ever around much to begin with when I was little. He met my mom in Montreal. Her family hated him and when they moved to Boston together because he had a new bank job there, something happened because I’ve only seen my grandmother and grandfather three times in my life but my mom has tons of pictures of them all over our little house. I have ideas about their characters just from the pictures. My grandfather is a hearty man, tall but somehow stocky at the same time, and
he looks like a jolly person who doesn’t laugh very much. My grandmother is small, especially next to him, white-haired, and looks like a wholesome athletic petite person who was heavily into gymnastics or figure skating. They have a turkey farm outside of Montreal. My mom used to gut the turkeys when she was in high school. She looks nothing like her parents. She is dark and mysterious, a little bit like her dad, with shining black hair and her eyelashes are so dark that it looks like she’s wearing eyeliner and mascara, even when she isn’t. If you didn’t know it, you would think she was from the Middle East. She kind of has a Kardashian look, without all of the makeup and everything. I’ve got big eyelashes but, looks-wise, I’m more like a boy, I think.

Sometimes I think, can’t I just get in the water? Like the tossed-over pieces of body parts, and swim there, treading water, and bob around like a camera on the water’s surface and just be there, witnessing? Like actually be there? I can put myself there, in my mind, but it’s different: the cold water around my tensing body, the largesse feeling of the sea surrounding me as the boats move away, watching Medea and Jason making out, kissing extravagantly, pawing each other, maybe even having sex in the stern of the Argonaut boat as they head off into a life together. My writing teacher tells me, *Yes, Louise, just do it! Write it! Take yourself right to wherever you’re going!* But to the ancient Black Sea? Watching the Argonauts sail away? Or in Maine, floating in the water, watching my mom and my brother in a boat with a man tour guide showing us around. I watch the boat and I think, why does she- my mother, an extraordinary woman- have a tour guide driving her around? Where’s the man who should say, *Good God, woman, I’ve found you!* Where is my dad? My dad is just a dickwad. I guess my dad is a prick. My dad loves money. My dad loves I guess everything/anything/something else
more than he loves us. Or did my mom do something to make him so fed up with her?
Whatever really happened, and however it happened, doesn’t matter as much as the
reality that my mom’s stuck with paying for my college with her nursing salary and
making sure Liam (my teenager brother) keeps his act together and doesn’t start, like,
dealing drugs or something. He’s not going to deal drugs, but when you have a dad who
turns his back on you, and you’re his son, what son wouldn’t want to turn to dealing
drugs, or doing drugs, or doing something to just obliterate the fact of the station that
you’ve been placed in? My mother tells me, “Louise, never become a fool over a man. Or
a woman. Never be a stranger to the truth.”

Brianna and Jasmine start arguing about Medea’s refugee status. The rest of us
slowly gather around them to hear their points. Jasmine argues that Medea isn’t a refugee
because she left her homeland willingly, not because it was inhospitable to her.

“How do you know it wasn’t inhospitable?” asks Brianna.

Jasmine shrugs. “I guess I don’t. But it’s not like there was a war going on or she
was kicked out of there.”

“Oh it’s not? How do we know?” Brianna reaches her hands out to emphasize
her words. “Medea might have been completely abused by her brother and father. Maybe
that’s why she killed her brother so easily and chopped him up into pieces. Maybe that’s
why she’s psychotic and kills her kids.” Brianna looks like she’s almost tearing up.

“Maybe Jason was the first alternative she ever had to the terrible home that she lived
in!”

I’d thought a similar thing before, but I didn’t say anything. Maybe this barbaric
place where Medea lived was just a living nightmare. Maybe she was molested by her
dad or just thoroughly abused. I mean, in some of my thoughts about Colchis, the island where she was from, it’s like she lived in a dungeon place where people were killed and hung from trees, or maybe she was like a slave for her family. I’ve thought about this, but, for maybe the first time, I’m thinking about my mom as a younger person. Maybe my mom hates her parents, and that’s why I never see them. But then why would she have pictures of them around our little house? Maybe my dad was so bad to her that she never wanted to see him again. I always assumed he left us, but maybe my mom just hates his guts and told him to leave. What did he do? Whenever me or Liam ask about her parents- we don’t go near the dad topic- my mom says, “It sure is complicated. Just do the best with your own life for now.”

Jasmine is very expressive now. Is she rehearsing? Is this part of our collaboration? I think maybe she’s trying something out that might be interesting. “Maybe,” Jasmine continues, “Medea’s just so fucking angry and wounded that she sees no way out. She’s not in a world where she can express herself. No one is going to listen to her. No one cares.”

Suzette speaks up. “Yeah. Everyone wants to be heard.”

“Yeah,” says Brianna.

“It’s when we don’t speak up that things get hard,” says Alicia.

I nod my head emphatically. The words are all crowded in my mouth, in the back of my cheeks like the nuts of a squirrel, crammed in there.

Alicia continues. She’s a double major, Drama and Psych. “If we don’t say anything, resentment grows, and then anger can get debilitating.”
Everyone nods at her. I picture resentment growing, like fungus, growing like grass that’s a foot high, moldy and thick, coating everything.

Olive claps her hands together. “I wonder. If Medea did have an audience, or someone who’d listen to her, what would she say?”

Marcy says, “Maybe that’s the chariot at the end. Maybe the golden chariot at the end is sort of what Medea would be if she hadn’t had to deal with men and all their disrespect of her.”

“That’s heavy, Marcy,” smiles Brianna, “but I like it.”

I smile too and my lips throb because they are so chapped. “Take care of your lips!” my mother told me at Thanksgiving. She gave me some Aquaphor, a nice sturdy tube of it. Can’t I use it? I have no idea where it is. Can I not keep track of what my mother is doing for me? Can I not keep track at all? I look around the room, imagining we’re all inside of Medea’s head and her growing resentment is the fungus that’s coating everything everywhere and soon it will morph into rage.

_Rage_. That’s the first word of _The Iliad_, depending on the translation. _Anger_. When my mom picked me up at the train station after my first semester she was listening to an _Iliad_ audiobook, sort of because I’d been taking that Mythology class and we’d talked about it on the phone. On the audiobook, a woman was summarizing the upcoming section. “Do you recognize this voice?” my mother asked.

“No,” I said.

“It’s Susan Sarandon. Do you know that actress?”

“No,” I told her.
“Yes, you do. Remember the Julia Roberts movie with the mom dying of cancer?”

“Stepmom,” I said. It’s a movie I won’t forget because after we watched it I couldn’t sleep regularly for about a month. I had my first full blown panic attack at school about a week after we watched it. My therapist pointed out that I was terrified of my mother dying. “Who isn’t?” I asked her. Sometimes, with Dr. Betsy, my words came right out, easy and quick, and just how I meant them. Sometimes they’d come out before I knew they were out, like when I said, “Who isn’t?” and surprised myself by saying something that I meant to say, or didn’t even know I was going to say, but that I meant.

Dr. Beth smiled. “Good point, Louise.”

“And Thelma and Louise,” my mother continued, our car humming along the gray road matted with orange and brown leaves. “Have you seen that movie?”

“No,” I said.

We watched Thelma and Louise later that night with my brother. I think of the ending a lot, Thelma and Louise in their white convertible, all the men and the cop cars behind them, squeezing each other’s hands, kissing, saying “let’s keep going”, and Louise gunning it towards the Grand Canyon cliff and over they go, freezing in the air.

Right now I think of it, the Grand Canyon, all brown and shaded with its caverns, canyons, and plateaus, and I’m imaging that brown red dirt stuff as the moldy resentment I was picturing in Medea’s head, in this room that I’m in with these other students. The redmold growing from clayish fungi to tall mangled thorny bushes and grasses, as tall and as thick as thickets. Do I have thickets in my mouth? And that’s why I can’t say what I want to say or figure out how to say it? Thickets? They stick my mouth up, all lodged
up and stuck, the many match book sticks of the them thicketing my words, thick as thieves, right in front of my mouth like a tepee made out of matchsticks that I’d like to just torch and demolish and blow up. I’d like to soar all these words I can’t say out into the wind, twiggy and turning, splintering apart high up out over the Grand Canyon.

“Louise?” asks Brianna. She can see that I’m continually nodding my head, maybe even she can see me working on my mouth, sucking my tongue and lengthening it tightly around on my teeth. “Are you going to say something, Louise?” She looks at me. “Do you have something to say?”

I nod. I struggle through the thicket. My tongue licks my lips and pulls them in, thbriars and burrs, the --- I’m surprised when my mouth tells her, “I’m going to write it down first.” I feel something like a long exhale fritter out around the edges of what I can only describe as a gray scarf that’s thinly covered my mouth and my head. It’s always felt comfortable, but it’s always felt anxious. This exhale breaks it up. There are ideas and prospects. There are specific things about my life, and what I think, that I can pay attention too and change. What could Medea change? I look at Brianna. Marianne is standing frozen on her lion chariot, my dad maybe walking around her. Medea’s golden chariot is pulled by dragons. All of them are up in the air, like Thelma and Louise over the Grand Canyon, their hair lifting in the wind. I suddenly feel like that tube that I kept imaging constricting Medea is right here on the floor in front of me like a giant chamber of a honeycomb. I’ve got some ideas of honey and words, maybe nipples and chariots. “Louise?” Brianna asks gently.

“I’m going to write a poem,” I tell her. “Just got to figure out where to go in.”
She’s on the wooded trail, running, thinking of her childhood home, of birdhouses and birdsongs since she just saw a goldfinch, feeding on a thistle, when she hears the grating cries, high-pitched and sing-songy, of a woman calling after a child, or a dog. “BAAAAAAAHH-beyyyyyyyyyy!” comes the yell in a shrieky soprano, looping through the leaves, through the trees, like a bad, trilling riff on a chickadee’s subdued, lovely fee bee call. “BAAAAAAAHHH- beyyyyyyyyyyy!”

How irritating, thinks Gretchen, running. What a terrible sound! Maybe the woman has lost her dog, her kid, but can’t she just call for it with a simple, forceful yell? The woods are tranquil, a respite on a Saturday morning. It’s one thing to call for a dog, but to shriek for it at the top of her lungs? Rude! “BAAAAAAAHH-beyyyyyyyyyyy!” What a fool
the woman must be with that kind of a voice, thinks Gretchen, with that kind of pitch. A plump housewife with chapped hands and watery eyes, probably saggy skin.

When she hears it again—BAAAAAAH-beyyyyyy!—Gretchen’s tempted to shout back, “Shut up!” Instead, she allows her irritation to pool in the small of her back, to stipple up her spine and jet down her arms, causing her to squeeze her thumbs, to grit her teeth. This burst of annoyance is like a little angry engine that spurs her on and she runs faster. She keeps her eyes on the ground so she won’t trip on any of the roots that jut out of the firm dirt like rocks poking out of calm water. The exposed roots have the scaled texture of warbler’s feet, dark, long, and knuckley, as if they aren’t tree roots at all but rather the giant bird feet of buried prehistoric dinosaurs. Gretchen hops around them, over them, imagining herself as a prehistoric woman running after an animal, or, possibly, away from one.

“BAAAAAAAH-beyyyyyy!” the voice keens, getting further away, getting swallowed into the glossy green leaves and the dark shadows beneath them. The faraway voice reaches Gretchen the same way that sunlight filters through the leaves in dripping flashes, causing her to squint. She can sense that the yeller woman is behind her, a little to her left, as her cries fade out, dispersing as though lifting, getting spread apart like an elongating bubble up towards the sky, out towards the city, and over the neighborhoods on the hill that slope towards the valley.

Gretchen can picture the trail that the woman’s probably on. It’s wider and runs parallel to Gretchen’s. There are some ghostly birch trees breaking up the monotony of the usual hardwoods that line the side of the trail and Gretchen has imagined the birches as cheering fans lining the route of a marathon as she’s run by them, their arms out for
high fives. Further along, the trail dips down the hill towards the narrow river that is sometimes full, and sometimes empty, to a spot where Gretchen once sat on a log as a child, somewhat lost, and a young couple, holding hands as they hiked, both wearing hiking boots, both wearing NYU sweatshirts, came upon her. They worried about her. They talked to her gently and then walked her back to the main parking lot where her mother was sitting on a large boulder, reading a book, “Birds of America,” by Lorrie Moore.

She had gone on a walk with her mother, just after they’d moved to the house

Gretchen knows these trails, the network of them spreading like mini ski trails to explore, some the size of small roads, some the size of footpaths, that trail over the small mountain reservation and then join up with one another in parking lots, or at the large reservoir, or at the pasture near the tall waterfall. She’s known these routes since childhood- her teen years onward, more specifically- and now that she’s almost thirty she can say that she’s been walking or hiking or running on them for more than half of her life.

She got lost only once in these woods, right after she turned twelve. She was walking with her mom and had a temper tantrum- she still had a temper then- and she ran away from her mother at a fork. A, which Gretchen remembers because she remembers thinking that her mother must have walked back to their house to get the book and also, at the time, Gretchen thought that maybe her mother was taking up a greater interest in birds, which was an interest of her father’s. Gretchen was thinking that maybe her parents would finally share a hobby, an interest other than their obvious interest, drinking, or
maybe her mother was at least trying to relate to her father in a different way. The book was fiction, though. It wasn’t any kind of bird guide. Her mother had always read books, sometimes to the point of aggravation, so it was nothing new.

The tantrum/lost episode happened right after her family had moved to the Tudor house bordering the wooded reservation from the other side of town, down in the valley, where they’d lived since Gretchen was born in a small yellow clapboard house on a busy street near the train station. They all referred to the yellow house as the “Lemon Drop”. In the Lemon Drop, Gretchen shared a room with her little sister, Mina. Their mother had painted various birds on the walls of their bedroom. Four sharp-tailed swallows soared across the wall in a hammock-shaped dip. A cardinal on a pine needled branch always looked like a holiday greeting card. A puffball of a bluebird, perched on the top of their window frame, made Gretchen think of a blue marshmallow. In the Lemon Drop’s small kitchen, above the back door, there was a birdsong clock with different birds in place of numbers, and the clock warbled out their different birdcalls on every hour: the Scarlet Tanager at noon or midnight, the Eastern Meadowlark at six, the Red-Winged Blackbird at nine. The birds on the clock, the birdsongs in her head, the chickadees, the meadowlarks, the purple martins, fluttered through her thoughts, and she would find herself imitating them with creaks and warbles. What strange sounds they were! They weren’t animals. They weren’t reptiles. They flew! Their sounds were more mechanical, like horns and whistles of man-made engineering, clean and neat, instruments and machines. The Goldfinch, on the clock, was at seven o’clock, and its call would trill in Gretchen’s head all morning after breakfast. She’d imitate it, sing it, its cute squeaky
little whistle, on her way to school. It would twist into her day, into Math class, tweeting to the bloom of numbers, or chirping the squeaks in her head as she ran pacers in Gym.

She’d seen today’s goldfinch at the start of her run before she heard the annoying woman shrieking for her dog. It was such a handsome little bird, pure yellow, in the midst of the thistle’s cottony tufts, eating its seeds. Gretchen stopped to watch it. She didn’t usually like to stop once she started to run, but she’d only just started a minute or two before, which didn’t really count since she ran for at least an hour. Here was a goldfinch, as yellow as a buttercup, and she thought immediately of the Lemon Drop’s kitchen clock. On the clock, too, the bird was eating a thistle. She thought of the squeaky whistle sounds that the goldfinch made. Could she remember it well enough to try to make the sounds? Would this goldfinch hear her and respond? The little bird didn’t make any noises. It didn’t even look at her. It ate industriously, twitching its head from side to side, plucking busily at the little seeds with their white downy plumes. Gretchen was close enough to see the feathers themselves, its notched tail, the white line markings that looked like they were painted on the black feathers with a small brush. Her father had showed her once, with a seagull feather at the beach when she was small, how the barbs and barbules that make up the feather’s vane can be hooked and unhooked, zipped together neatly so that the feather has purchase to fly.

She was thinking about those birdcall clock mornings at the Lemon Drop, those cottony schooldays, that yellow house. It had been a cozy time for her family. It had been a cozy time for her. She’d sit on the snug screened in porch in the back with her dad while he whittled things out of wood, mostly birds, then sanded them, while she drew
things in her sketch pad, also birds, mostly, while listening to Mina practice the piano inside. In general, she had come to think of the years in the Lemon Drop, as one is wont to create order and myth out of past experiences, as probably the sunniest part of her life. She and Mina shared the only cramped bathroom with their parents. The bathtub and tiles were the color of butterscotch, which was a terrible color for a bathroom, but when she and her sister took baths together when they were small, bubble baths that smelled like peaches, or when Gretchen took a bath alone in the evening when she was a little older, her mother would dim the lights, sometimes even light a candle, and leave it by the sink. The candle smelled like verbena. Its low light seemed to hum. The toffee-ish colored tiles would reflect a golden glow, and the little bathroom would feel like the center of some kind of rosy tenderness and soft light. Even if the sink was messy, with her father’s shaving stuff crammed onto one of its corners, her mother’s face cream and hairbrush with hair in it, the water glass holding their toothbrushes a little bit mucky and gross on its bottom, in the dimmed light it all felt cozy and homey, their house a place with no surprises, nothing sharp, nothing biting.

Then came the new job for her father, and her mother went back to work in the library in the city. They moved to the Tudor house, high above town, on the edge of the reservation, with a view of the city’s skyline. Gretchen didn’t like it from the start. She never liked Tudor houses.

“It’s like a fairytale house,” her mother had said.

Gretchen would never have thought her mother would go for a Tudor house.

“Tudor, Mom? Really?”

“You’ll finally have your own room!”
“I don’t like it,” said Gretchen.

“And you and Mina can have a bathroom all to yourselves.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“You will, sweetheart. You will!”

The Tudor was dark, medieval, with small, leaded pane glass windows that opened sideways like tiny doors. There were two stained glass windows on the stairwell, each with a small, red coat of arms, which, at the time, made Gretchen only think of Burger King or the place she had been for her friend Andrew’s birthday, Medieval Times, where they watched “Epic Battles of Steel and Steed” and she kept wondering how miserable the horse was. The outside of the Tudor was rough stucco, like old frosting or whipped meringue that’s hardened enough to scrape anything that brushes against it. The wool of Gretchen’s sweater, when she brought the garbage out, would get caught on its surface. The house’s front had dramatically pointy eaves that jabbed upwards into the air like angry eyebrows, its face with its stoop generally like a jutting chin, wanting to pick a fight.

Maybe it was simply her myth-making of her childhood- the Tudor might not have looked so bad to some people- but it was hard to summon up warm memories there. There were holidays, yes, when her father would string lights up on the wrought iron railings along the front stoop. Often the lights were there until Easter, and no one would remember to turn them on. One year some small kids showed up at the door to trick or treat and there was no candy. Even Gretchen, in high school at the time, had forgotten that it was Halloween. She wrote a note that said, “Sorry No Candy” and Scotch-taped it to the front door. When she took the note down a couple of days later, the tape tore away
some of the crimson paint with it, leaving behind a peach colored splotch that looked like a tiny fist giving the finger. The splotch remained there for years. Gretchen only pointed it out to Daniel, her ex-boyfriend, who laughed and then said, “Why didn’t anyone fix it?” He later went outside with a red Sharpie that was in his bag and colored it in. “Done,” he said.

They had just moved into the Tudor, bordering the leafy reservation, when she and her mom went for the hike together that ended with Gretchen’s tantrum/lost episode. “See?” smiled her mom as they headed onto the path behind the Tudor. “See what’s right in our own back yard?” Whatever Gretchen had gotten upset about, tantrummy and mad, while they were hiking, she doesn’t remember. Probably it was about the move, about the new Tudor place that she hated. Whatever it was, she ran. She ran away from her mother and took a fork in the trail. She remembers sitting down on a log and crying, not because she was scared, but because she was mad. She was sad. Her mother and father, she was thinking, had ruined her life when they sold the Lemon Drop. She has since of course entertained the idea that maybe the little yellow house hadn’t been all that sunny after all. Maybe it was simply that she was growing up, that the move to the Tudor happened to coincide with a growing awareness where she could see her family’s discontent. Either way, she didn’t like the changes. She still remembers sitting on that log, hoping her mother was looking for her and would come and find her, and take care of her, maybe even draw her a bath, with a candle, when they got home. She remembered the leaves all around her all looked the same, like the same trees, with the same standard green. She could hear birds squawking but she couldn’t see any of them. She could hear a woodpecker knocking the trunk of a tree. The sounds of insects, low in the brush,
buzzing, sounded like they were coming out of speakers, a sound system. She thought, where do I go? A little warbler landed on the ground and looked at her. She thought of the old bedroom with the birds on the wall that her mother had painted. She couldn’t imagine her mother painting anything. Did she really paint them? And the bird house? Did they really build it? Her father had built a large bird house. It had a shingled roof. Gretchen had helped him paint it, white with blue trim. When she got white paint all over her hands and began to panic, her father calmly showed her how to make a handprint on the sidewalk in front of the Lemon Drop. She made about eight of them, happily, in the pattern of a hopscotch court. The white hand prints were still on the sidewalk when they moved. The birdhouse attracted purple martins, house wrens, sparrows, and, sometimes, a bluebird, whose bright feathers matched the blue trim. Abruptly, the birds stopped coming. Birdhouse activity stopped. Her father explained that probably a snake had gotten into it and scared them all away. Or a raccoon.

Gretchen said, “They’re that stupid and scared to just leave the nice house behind?”

“No, sweetheart, they are that smart,” replied her father, tapping his head.

Generally, once she’s been running for about ten minutes, Gretchen feels like she can keep going and going, and this is the case as she runs away from the woman’s whirling dog calls fading behind her. She’s been running a lot ever since Daniel broke up with her a few months ago. Over the last few months she’s gotten a little obsessed with what she’s eating and how she’s exercising. It isn’t that she cares much about what she looks like, but rather, the control side of things that keeps her doing it. She likes the
movement of the running and the heavy breathing. She likes her body to feel like a working system, a functioning tool. She’s always exercised, she played basketball in college, but there was something about covering distance, and moving along the surface of earth with her feet, the urge to run, to run away, and to run on her own time when she isn’t doing it for any other reason than something for herself, for her restlessness, that she simply wanted to do. Without Daniel in the picture, she has all of this time that before was spent with him and now is open time, passing time. All the free time, plus feeling like she wants to feel tighter, more in control, the running and stuff makes a structure of what are otherwise thinned-out days. She can hardly remember some of them. Sometimes she thinks that if she wasn’t just managing being in control, or filling up her time, that she’d use her time better, maybe help other people, though how, exactly, she didn’t know. Maybe she would create something, though she didn’t know what that would be either. Even though she liked being alone better than being with people, she often felt like she missed someone, but she didn’t know who. She didn’t know how so many people managed so well to get stuff done. All that focus, all that study or research and helping other people. The best she could do was run and follow the path that she always chose when she was in these woods.

The strangest thing about not being with Daniel any more, though, isn’t her inordinate amount of free time, it’s that no one cares where she is, what she’s doing, or when she’s doing it. No one’s looking for her, or wondering about her. Her mother used to check in on her sometimes, up until a couple of years ago when she moved to London. Now, they pretty much checked in via text, maybe a photo: the line outside of the theater
with the new Harry Potter play, a snowy owl on the pier in Nyack that she and Daniel went to see.

Her father never really checked in on her to begin with. He still lived in the Tudor house, which Gretchen still hated, but she did like it when her father went away- right now he was in Florida, looking at some condo development on some golf course that he partially owned- and she could leave her tiny apartment in Jersey City and spread out in multiple rooms, go for runs, watch movies, or even drink a little bit herself, though she’d learned in college that drinking didn’t suit her. It didn’t take any edge off at all. It didn’t help. It only made her feel softer, but in a melting and dribbling way. It made her cry.

She and Mina used to talk on the phone. Now, though, she didn’t even know where Mina was. The divorce began when Mina was in tenth grade and Gretchen was away at college in Massachusetts. Everyone dropped the ball. Mina was smoking a lot of pot, drinking, and no one helped her get around to applying to college. She went to rehab twice and, as far as Gretchen knew, she was still sober. It seemed, though, that all of the damage was still there. When they spoke on the phone- Mina was living on a dairy farm upstate- she’d say things to Gretchen like, “All beings belong to each other. Sister, we are all sisters.” In her last text to Gretchen, Mina wrote, “If you can’t understand me, you don’t deserve to AGREE with me. How can you say you agree when you don’t understand? My attention is given ONLY to beings who so naïve????”

“Your family’s a disaster,” Daniel would tell her. “I don’t know how you’re so normal.” Gretchen was the manager of a restaurant. She knew she wasn’t normal, but since she felt like a blank, pretty much, an impatient blank, she could accept herself as looking pretty normal. “Even though you’re funny looking,” Daniel would tease. “Like a
Whippoorwill. A little turtle.” Gretchen had an Audubon print, a poster on her wall, of a Whippoorwill flying towards a moth. On a branch below was the whippoorwill in another pose, hunched up, its head tucked in like a turtle, on a branch.

It was true she had a sort of prominent brow, maybe even a small beak of a nose, and a tendency to slouch. She, too, was well camouflaged. She knew she wasn’t “normal”. But who was? It was the reason Daniel broke up with her, finally. She understood why. She couldn’t soften. She felt it, hard and tightened, like a whistle, like a bird chirp. For a while she thought Daniel was maybe softening her up, like cold putty getting worked over with the heat of hands. Finally, though, he said to her, simply, “I just can’t reach you.” He looked at her kindly. They were on the top of the Brooklyn Bridge. “You could feel better than you do, Gretchen.” He meant get help. She knew what he meant. But what if she didn’t want to be any different? What if she didn’t want to try? She looked over the slope of the Brooklyn Bridge’s pedestrian walkway, wishing she had her running shoes on. It was easier to run, and keep running on the same path.

Gretchen felt almost nothing about the break up. The competitive part of herself felt a little bit disappointed, the athlete part of herself that, during games, would choose the strongest point guard on the other team and secretly keep a personal tally of who was making more points, herself or the other girl. Looking at Daniel, she wondered for a moment what sort of woman he would eventually find, who would love him, who he could “reach”. Looking into his concerned face she felt a little bit brittle, and hard, but she felt, as usual, tight, and strong, angry, even, almost mechanically built, which was a comfortable way for her to feel. It was the same with running. Even though she used her
body, and bounced, and sweat, and could taste the sweat on her upper lip, she felt almost robotic, like an android, and it felt fine. In motion, she felt pretty good.

It was gradual, or, again, maybe Gretchen was only noticing what was going on because she was older, more aware, but, when they moved to the Tudor, basically, her father drank too much almost every night. He wasn’t a mean screamer, he just would get glazed over, as if he’d been dropped in a vat of glazing solution that made a membrane over every single bit of his body that put him at a remove, encased in reserve. When he really drank too much, he was a clear fool, stumbling and slurring, grinning a stupid grin or snoring on the sofa, burping. One time when she went to get a glass of water in the kitchen, late at night after they’d first moved, Gretchen saw him pissing in the kitchen garbage can. She raced back upstairs and closed her eyes in bed. She thought to herself, *that was a dream.*

After a while, her mother started to drink more too. Her eyes would either get narrowed and angry, or they’d get like her father’s, muted and distant. Both of them would sometimes have eyeballs that jittered shakily, like they couldn’t focus on anything. They’d look past Gretchen, even though they were focusing on her, as if someone was maybe creeping up behind her and they could see the creeper coming but they weren’t letting Gretchen know.

Sometimes, both of them, when they were drunk, were kinder. They might hug Gretchen tighter and smile tenderly, sideways, sweetly at her, again like they were seeing something that she could not whether it was behind her, or next to her, or inside of her. When she was younger, this kindness wasn’t so bad because she knew that her parents
knew so much more than her, and it made her feel filled up, their smiling, their unknown knowledge, and her being so close to it. Their knowledge smiling at her. Kisses on her forehead felt wet, and a little bit gross, but they felt full of something that she had thought was warmth, that she had thought was maybe love.

Then one day Gretchen, at fourteen, came into the kitchen and Mina, ten at the time, was standing in front of the fridge, swigging from a beer can. She held the can out to Gretchen. “Want a sip?” Gretchen wanted to slap her, slap the can out of her hand, but the can would have dropped, splattering to the floor, and Gretchen would be the one, most likely, to have to clean it up. Gretchen took the can from Mina. She took a sip of it. The fizz burned and it tasted bitter but also like low sunlight on a golden field. She poured it out in the kitchen sink. It frothed around the drain looking like white foam that had been peed into. The bubbles honeycombed and then popped, crackled, and then disappeared, leaving the smell, yeasty and yellow, to reach her face. Mina shrugged at her. “I’ll just get another one,” she said.

The house became inactive, empty, even when all four of them were home. Her parents seemed to be disappearing. They were ghostly and elusive, slipping into other rooms and away from conversation. They hardly talked to one another. Lights wouldn’t get turned on. It was easier when they drank every night, Gretchen would tell herself, because then Gretchen could do what she wanted. She could steal a six pack and drink it with Mina up in her room. She could say goodnight to one of them and then sneak out to go fool around with Ethan Black. Even if she came home late and one of her parents was coherent enough to be momentarily angry, they always forgot by morning anyway.
Most nights it was the same: her mother would occupy a small room that she called her “sewing room” off of the kitchen where usually she drank wine, sometimes beer, put on her reading glasses and listened to NPR loudly while she either knit sweaters that she donated to the church or made quilts out of different squares of fabric that got progressively sloppy. She’d stumble up the stairs to bed. Through the wall next to her bed, Gretchen would sometimes hear her mother crying in her bathroom with the water running. Gretchen was sure that she had the water running to cover up the crying, so that Gretchen, or Mina, wouldn’t hear it. Gretchen’s father would drink mostly bourbon on the back patio, a place where he used to identify birds with his bird book, a place where, twice, a rafter of turkeys came down the slope from the reservation and surrounded him while he slept on a chaise lounge. The patio. The patio and that one time- the awful unclear summer memory- when Gretchen was in high school, heading to bed and she glanced down the hall to the open door to the dark patio. Her father was in the chaise lounge. Mina stood next to him. Gretchen seized up, everywhere inside, when she saw what she thought was her father’s hand hidden under Mina’s miniskirt.

“Mina!” she called. Mina turned around, smoothed her skirt over her buttock as she walked towards Gretchen. Their father didn’t stir. In the darkness of the hallway Gretchen asked her, “Did Dad just have his hand up your skirt?”

“What?” Mina smiled nervously. “No!” Her breath smelled like Bourbon. “We were looking at the stars.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!”
When someone doesn’t remember doing something, did they even really do it? Is someone responsible for things they’re unaware that they did?

Her family spent those Tudor years disappearing, all of them, her family, into the unawares, into the rooms of that dingy house. Was it even a family? Did her mother really paint those birds? Disappearing their personalities, slipping into trances on their own. Gretchen often felt slightly invisible herself. If part of her had vanished, she didn’t mind it. Maybe that’s the part that Daniel couldn’t “reach”. What a dumb thing to say, thinks Gretchen, I can’t reach you. Such melodrama. Who in the world thinks families really operate like we see them on tv, or in movies, or in books? Daniel thought so, apparently. When Gretchen went to meet his family for Daniel’s sister’s birthday, they were all so kind to each other, so bubbly, that, to her, they seemed completely phony, completely fake. At work, at the restaurant, the people who were smiling with one another and tenderly looking into each other’s eyes looked flat out stupid. The terse parties, the abrupt talkers who were impatient seemed, to her, to be the only honest ones. She didn’t need to be seen by people. It was easier, for sure, to not deal with people. She could run, like this, along roads and paths and keep it simple. When things really annoyed her and that little angry engine revved, she’d twist and pull out hairs behind her ear. Twist, pull. She didn’t need anything from anyone. She’d yank the hairs. The springed pain at each pluck felt somehow like the steps in her runs.

“BAAAAAAAAAH-behhhhhhhhhh!” The high-voiced yell is back. Gretchen has looped around and can tell that the shouter is ahead of her on the wide trail, wide enough
for a truck. Gretchen thinks for a moment of a turn-off, a place where she can veer away onto one of the winding footpaths to avoid an encounter.

The woman is in the middle of the trail, her back to Gretchen, her hands cupped around her mouth to form a megaphone as she yells straight up into the air like a fountain. Beside her stands a boy, about ten years old. He turns around, looks expectantly at Gretchen as she approaches. “Have you seen a dog?”

“No,” huffs Gretchen, moving along.

“Wait. Wait,” says the boy. “Can I write down our phone number in case you see him?” Gretchen stops because his eyes flash up at her. When she stops, she sees them better. They are golden brown and translucent, like amber. He wears a hat with ear flaps even though it’s warm out.

“Oh!” says his mother, turning around. “Have you seen a dog running around? A little beagle sort of a mutt?”

“No,” says Gretchen.

“She went running after a deer… We heard her barking for a while but then nothing.”

“What’s her name?”

“Poppy,” she says, then screams, “PAPPPP-paiyyyyyyyy!”

Gretchen cringes.

“She does this,” says the boy.

“Your mom? Or your dog?”

“Poppy runs. She always comes back though.”
His mom ambles away from them. She stands a few steps off of the trail. She yells again, like a quick admonishment, into the trees. She mutters, “What a pain in my ass.” The boy giggles. When she reemerges onto the trail, the mother asks Gretchen, “Can I ask you a giant favor?”

Gretchen hates it when people ask, “Can I ask you...” as a precursor to anything. She had a boss who would always say, “Can I make a suggestion?”

“Yes?” asks Gretchen.

“Would you mind staying with Thomas for a few minutes? I’ve been dragging him all over the place. I could cover ground quickly if he didn’t have to keep up. He’s very slow today,” she teases.

Thomas smiles. “I have a bunch of really bad blisters,” he tells Gretchen. “Want to see?”

“Um, I…“

“Wait. Are you Gretchen Walker? Are you Mina’s big sister?”

“I- Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Oh wow! I’m sure you don’t remember me. I used to give Mina piano lessons.”

“I remember the piano…”

“My name’s Angie. Angie Palmer. You were pretty little. Mina was very talented. Did she keep playing?’

“No, actually.”

“I remember her. She was quite good. How is she?”

“We’re not really in touch.”

“Oh well that’s too bad. Your parents still in town?”
“My dad is. They got divorced, like, a while ago.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Mom,” Thomas nudges his mother. “Poppy.”

“Yes. The dog, the dog. Would you mind, Gretchen, staying with Thomas, really quick?”

Gretchen shrugs. How could she say no?

“Do you have to be somewhere?” Angie asks.

Gretchen shrugs. Angie hurries off, sort of speed walking with her wide hips, her throaty yell, resembling a hedgehog wiggling her way into the forest.

“I got the blisters from new cleats,” announces Thomas.

“Ouch,” says Gretchen.

“Yeah. I play soccer all year long. Fall, Winter, and Spring.”

“How long have you had your dog?”

“Like four years. We got Poppy right after my sister wasn’t born.”

“What?”

“I was six. The baby died. She was only a month away from being born.”

“Oh.”

“Her name was Sarah.”

Gretchen is silent. Something strange, like a smell or a song, slides into her and balls up in her chest, her throat. She thinks of a baby, unborn, fully formed, small and red like, raw, like the fleshy ones she’d find on the ground in early hatched eggs. She feels as though someone- who?- has just put their hands firmly on her shoulders. Is it the mention of Mina? The piano? Her earlier thoughts about the Lemon Drop?
Thomas continues. “Then my dad brought Poppy home and even though it made my mom cry a lot, it made her really happy.”

“Do you like Poppy?”

“I love Poppy. She’s like my sister. Look!,” he whispers urgently. He pokes her in the arm. “Giant Woodpecker! Giant Woodpecker!”

A woodpecker, over two feet tall, stands on a decaying log with a velveteen surface. Its crested head is bright red. It twitches its head as though it’s being puppeteered, looks directly at them and then, as if to show off, drives its beak into the log repeatedly, drilling pneumatically, like it’s having a head seizure..

“Woh!” says Thomas, laughing quietly, careful not to disturb it. They watch it- *dit dit dit dit dit dit dit dit* - then it looks at them, pauses, and flies away. ”Wow!” says Thomas. He imitates the sound. “Pileated Woodpecker!” he says. “Pileated. I don’t know what that word means. Do you?”

Gretchen is surprised. “How do you know that’s its name?”

“I know a lot about birds. My dad likes them. He taught me.”


“Corvids are my favorite birds.”

“What are they again?”

“The corvids are the smartest of all the birds. The crow family. You have your crows, your ravens, your rooks, magpies… what else… nutcrackers. I like the magpie best but they don’t have them in New Jersey. I sometimes think of myself as a raven.”

“You think of yourself…”
“Yeah,” he laughs. “Ravens are super smart. They make jokes. Once when we were in these woods, a big raven was making barking sounds to Poppy, flying over us. Poppy would bark and then the raven would, like, bark back. It was funny!”

“I saw a goldfinch on my way into the woods today.”

“They’re the state bird of New Jersey.”

“Everyone knows that,” laughs Gretchen, suddenly feeling like a child.

“Once at my house I saw a hawk”—Thomas makes his hands into claws—“snatch a sparrow and then take off.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. It snatched it,” he clenches his fists in front of him, “and took off.”

“That sounds scary.”

“From our birdfeeder. It was so cool.”

In the distance they hear Angie’s looping croon. They both snicker. “She sounds like a bird,” says Thomas. “A Mom bird. I’d name her ‘Looking for Dog Bird’. No. ‘Looking for Lost Family Member Bird’. What would your bird name be?”

“Mine?” Gretchen shrugs. “What would yours be?”

“Um... Feathercatcher. I already know it though because my dad gave me the name. I used to find feathers all the time. Blue Jays, mostly, but my dad made a story up about a bird boy who flies under the bigger birds and catches all the downy stuff, all the best little feathers that fall out of the big ones. The Feathercatcher catches the best stuff and then makes a cozy nest and stays super warm and happy.”
“All right then, Feathercatcher,” smiles Gretchen. She isn’t annoyed. She isn’t angry. She has forgotten that she was on a run. “Tell me. How do you make your nest so cozy?”

“I fluff it up with down. Then my mom or dad come and kiss me goodnight. Sometimes both of them. Together.”

Gretchen imagines for a moment her mother, and her father, together, sitting on a bed, any of her beds, even the Lemon Drop bed, and it seems so impossibly contrived that it almost makes her laugh, like a comical dream. At the Tudor, in high school, she’d have dreams where her parents would appear in the same room, together, but mostly they were literally dreams about trash. In the dreams, her mother and father were more active than they ever were in real life, fussing over splitting garbage bags and junk strewn throughout the rooms. They would argue, but at least they were arguing, in the dreams. Once, as they argued, she dreamt that the upstairs toilet was overflowing. Shit, literally, all over the place, and Gretchen thought, ok, here I am with the paper towels and Windex. I can clean it up. When she went to turn off the water to the toilet to stop the overflow, the valve wasn’t there. There wasn’t any place to turn it off. She went to the door, water sloshing around her feet, and when she opened it, there was her father, his body covered in tiny birds, as small as ants, or black bees.

“Does your dad still like birds?” asks Gretchen.

“He still likes birds. My dad’s been, like, kind of depressed.”

“Oh.”

“He hurt his back when he was installing a marble island thing.”

“Is he a builder?”
“He’s an architect. The painkiller he was taking made him addicted.”

“Oh no,” says Gretchen.

“No, he’s okay. He went to a rehab place up in New Hampshire last summer. Me and my mom stayed at a ski mountain hotel down the street. It wasn’t winter though. Obviously.”

“Is he home with you now?”

“Yeah. He’s always been home. He’s way better.” Thomas shrugs. “If he didn’t tell me that he doesn’t feel so great sometimes, I wouldn’t even know.”

“Wow,” says Gretchen.

“Actually we’re on our way to a meeting after this. We leave Poppy in the car. She doesn’t care. She likes it better than being left at home.”

“How old are you?”

“Eleven. How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“How old’s your sister?”

“Who?”

“Your sister. The one that my mom taught piano.”

“Oh. Twenty-five. No, twenty-six.” Gretchen bends over to tie her sneaker. “I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

“Did you guys get in a fight?”

“No. Kind of. Yeah.”

“If I had a sister, I’d be friends with her. Even if I didn’t really like her.”

“How do you know?”
“Because I know how sad my mom was when Sarah never got to be born. They’re still sad about it. They tell me how lucky we are. Sarah never got to be here. She didn’t get to try it out.”

Gretchen looks at his face, his eyes. They look back at her, unflinchingly, a twinkle inside of their amber. Who is this kid? “You do look like a Magpie,” Gretchen tells him.

“A raven,” smiles Thomas.

There’s commotion behind them. They can hear some laughter. Angie comes around a bend in the path. She’s talking animatedly into her cell phone, smiling broadly.

A medium sized dog, splotched in tan, white and black, tears towards Thomas. The dog circles him, wiggling, then jumps up at Thomas’s chest. “Hi Poppy! Hi! Good girl! Good girl!”

Angie is smiling into her phone as she approaches. “Well everything is fine, now,” she beams. “We’ll see you in about half an hour. Yes.” She smiles bigger. “I love you too. Yes.” She puts the phone in her pocket. “Dad says we’re going to see your grandmother after the meeting.”

“Yay! Can we go to the custard place?”

“Possibly. Maybe.”

“Where was she?”

“Poppy? On the regular loop, looking for us.”

“We knew it!” smiles Thomas.

“Let’s get going to meet Dad.” She waves a hand up to Gretchen. “Gretchen. Thank you. You’re our hero today. Right, Thomas?”
Thomas nods, then moves in a limpy jog towards his mother, waving back to Gretchen, “Bye!”

Gretchen sits down on the log where the Giant Woodpecker landed. She touches the crumbling, wet wood. She reaches for the area where the bird pecked so impressively. The wood is almost powdery, moist, the color of red mud. She pokes it with her finger and it crumbles. A soft hunk of it falls into what must be a hollowed spot in the log. The red flash of a cardinal, like a bright idea, darts away from her. She thinks of Thomas, of the baby Sarah, and Mina, too. How could a small boy take better care of himself than she was taking care of herself? The birds chatter around her like crazy. It seems louder than usual, a real racket, and Gretchen finds herself trying to breathe properly. She is thinking of her father and Mina, the awful patio memory that, in her mind, is somehow merging with the abandoned birdhouse and now these woods, that baby, this chirping, squeaking clatter that is somehow caged inside of her, chickadees in the rungs of her ribcage, a goldfinch on the hoop of a skirt, a bluebird corsage flowering in her wrist vein.

Something moves, a long slender shadow across the trail at about waist height. For a moment she thinks it’s a long stick being carried in a dog’s mouth, but then the dark line swings upward and shudders, landing on a branch. Gretchen bristles. She looks up. It’s a vulture, a Black Vulture, smaller than the Turkey Vulture, but stupider, and meaner. She’s never seen one up close. It is so close that she can see the texture of its ugly gray head, warty and rippled, like fungus. She can see its beady, reptilian eye. It stands on the branch, looks right, looks left, then looks directly at her, its black feathers encasing it like a worn black overcoat. The bird lifts its wings, a sooty cape, then tucks
them back in. Its body is like a giant, broad-shouldered bat. To Gretchen, it looks like a big dark salt-lick of poison.

She’s read about this invasive species, saw on the news how they descended last winter on a suburban development that had once been farmland. The news anchor explained that a group of them could surround a baby calf, poke its eyeballs out to disorient it, and then tear it apart. Gretchen looks above, to her left, and sees two more, on a branch, side by side like trench-coated thugs. To her right, another high, another low. Behind her there are four, low down, on a waist-high tree trunk of a tipped over tree. All of them, pendants of lead. Their curled beaks, their talons, their whole systems, are made to eat dead things. These are the things than can eat me, thinks Gretchen, if I was dead. Can they hurt me now? She is frightened. One of them on a higher branch undoes its wings and flies overhead. She picks up a stick and waves it around. None of them flinch. She steps a heavy step forward to startling them, but none of them budge. She shouts. “Shoooo!” Another one lands on a nearby log, like a small man, looking at her, bemused and condescending. She picks up a rock and throws it. She misses. The vulture is motionless, looking at her. She stares back at it. Its face looks stupid, like a seagull’s. It blinks, cocks its head sideways. Its face looks dumb enough to be evil, or smart enough to look dumb. It is a face of a thing that she doesn’t want to look at, an insidious thing that should fly away. Behind her is a raspy, jerky, hissing sound, like when a child tries a pull start engine and it won’t turn over. Then, together, a group of the vultures begin to open their wings. They make strange pig-like snorts, and a rattling that sounds like rice being shaken in tin cans. Gretchen yells. She waves her arms. She yells, “Go away!” She
yells “Leave me alone!” and waves her arms. She jumps, waving her arms, wiggling her body, yelling, “Go away!” as loud as she can, trying to make herself as alive as she can.

The dark birds thunder away, fluttering away into the sky, like giant bats. They are dark pinches, high up, when Gretchen hears someone calling something in the distance. “Gretchen!” She hears her name. It’s a boy. “Gretchen!” It’s Thomas. Is it Thomas? She can see him, tiny, far down the trail. He looks like a bird, pointed and small. He stands in the middle of the path, the figure of his mother even smaller behind him. A man is next to her. “Gretchen!” Thomas waves his hands back and forth over his head, indicating that he sees her.

She can see him. His arms are waving. All around him are trees covered in white buds, springtime, so he looks like he’s calling to her from a cloud. He is a little dark bird in a cloud. “Gretchen!’ he calls, chirping her name. She is flooded with song. Thomas waves his skinny wings at her. “Do you need a ride?”

“Yes!” answers Gretchen, yelling. She runs towards him. “Yes, I do!”
MEDICAL NOTES

You are maneuvered around and then lifted out of your mother. You are covered, like all babies, in a white waxy film called vernix. You’re the last of your mother’s eight babie, the only one to be born via c-section, the only one who causes your mother to have the scar, a thick pink ribbon that stretches vertically in a gash next to her bellybutton.

You wonder what’s in there, wonder if you could open that scar. You’re female, like her. You imagine the scar as if it’s on a hinge and it’s the little door that’s there for a lantern’s light. You’ve seen the coiled guts of mice, of birds and squirrels that the cats leave on the doormat. You’ve stepped on them with your bare feet, springing your foot up like you’ve touched something fiery hot.

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Leave out the day-to-day illnesses, the strep throats, the trips to the steaming bathroom with the croup, with bronchitis. Leave out the basic stomachaches, the hives, the skinned knees and stubbed toes.

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You come across a hard lump on the back of your skull, as if a tiny doorknob is starting to grow. You feel it and wonder, when did that happen? It feels like one of the smooth stones that you pick up on the beach in the summertime, but it’s underneath your hair, your scalp, pushing out. Not in your hand like a stone that fits so perfectly, that you’re ready to throw as far as you can into the water. You take your mother’s hand in your hand and guide her fingers back and forth over the knob. Quickly, her fingers start fussing around it without your help. Her fingers on your scalp, in your hair, sound like the wind in tall grass, or sand getting sifted.

In the operating room, they put a thing like a plastic bowl over your mouth. It’s peach colored and looks like an athletic cup. The doctor tells you to count to ten. Masked faces look down at you with their different swipes of eyes, one pair droopy, another pair bright. You have a mask on too, this peach colored plastic thing that smells like a new doll. The masks feel like bumpers when you look at the nurses and doctors, when you feel it over your own mouth.

Your bed is a giant metal crib that looks like a cage. Your mother lowers the side and makes a face at you that says, These cribs are crazy! The doctor who removes the lump says it looks like a piece of popcorn. Your oldest brother loses a molar. The tooth, you think, looks like a shriveled piece of popcorn as well. The doctor laughs as he tells your mother that you talked all through the surgery. A real chatterbox! When he tells your mother it is only a cyst, you see her face relax as if warm sunshine is hitting her after she’s been cold in the shade.

It is very hard to sleep in the hospital because of your metal crib cage bed, and because you’re not wearing underwear beneath your gown. A nurse picks you up and
carries you out into the shiny yellow hallway. You sit on her lap at some sort of control panel where she pushes red buttons, answers phones, and talks into a little microphone, paging people.

On the way home from the hospital you tell your mother that you want to be a nurse. *Because the nurses are so kind?*, she asks. No, you tell her, because you like the white tights.

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At Thanksgiving, going around the table, naming heroes, you say your hero is the family pediatrician. He is tall, old, and kind. You hate it when he has to check your private area, but it’s part of the check-up. He has a funny way of asking if everything’s okay, listing off a litany: *any grumbles or grunts? rumbles or rants? wheezes or whines?* When you learn that his first name is Sterling, he becomes a long silver spoon, and somehow related to Sterling North, in your mind, the man who wrote *Rascal*, a book that you enjoy about a boy and his raccoon.

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Leave out the checkups, the vaccines and all that stuff. Leave out the dental world of cleanings and fillings. Don’t get into the slips on the ice or the mini hockey stick hit in the head at recess or the wipe outs on the bike, getting the wind knocked out, the jammed thumbs or really deep splinters.

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You are wearing your regular clothes, lying on your side on an examining table. There is a watercolor of a heeling sailboat on the wall opposite you. Its colors are like cotton candy, which make it ugly and prissy. Your mother is holding your hand. A couple
of people—a doctor, a nurse, you don’t know—are standing behind you. One of them is digging carefully with a needle, like he’s looking for a sliver of glass, on the side of your neck, behind your ear. At school, Jimmy Roney was holding a sharpened pencil with its point sticking straight up. Somehow you bumped into him, or fell, or something, and the pencil tip stabbed you in the neck. The doctor is looking for the graphite. Or maybe it’s not in there and the pewter mark is a tattoo. You are thinking that this amount of attention seems excessive for a poke in the neck from a pencil. Maybe this is a dream. Maybe this is one of those memories that is a combination of other memories, or possibly it is a dream.

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Leave out the poison ivy, sunburns, and cracked lips.

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Stitches from sledding and the little knots of the stitches look like rat whiskers. It might be your friend who gets the sledding stitches. Or your brother. What is certain is that the bright blood on the snow is a red that you have never seen before.

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Don’t include that your mother dies. It happens too fast to need a hospital. Plus it wouldn’t have been you at the hospital, it would have been her.

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In the winter you have a cough. It is satisfyingly rattley except for when the tickle of it overtakes you and then it’s like torture with a downy itch that can’t be smoothed over. Your stomach muscles get sore as if you’ve been doing lots of sit-ups. When you cough deeply, you discover that there’s a spot near your pubic bone that inflates like a
small balloon. It is on the left side, the left side of your mons pubis, just above your groin. It doesn’t hurt. Sometimes it aches a little. It is the size of a quarter, or an elevator button. Outside, the trees are completely bare so the upstairs has more light than usual, plus the snow everywhere reflects the light upward to the walls and the ceiling. Your older sister is folding laundry when you come out of the shower. “What’s this?” you ask her. You point to the specific area. You have no pubic hair because you’re eight or nine. You tighten your stomach to show her and the two of you watch the bump thing rise like a small, puffy half bubble, like those birds that have a chest that they can inflate. You push the button back down and it stays put. Your sister folds a towel. “It’s a gland,” she tells you.

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Leave out those other vaccines for travel and the braces, the headgear. Forget about the foot doctor, when you are thirteen, who tells you that you have Freiberg’s infarction, aka a “dead toe”. Your toe might not bend as far as your others, but it is definitely not dead. How in the world can a toe die? Or the doctor in France who tells you that you have a chronic skin disease. Leave out the sciatica that kept you from practicing with your team one spring. Instead you jogged slowly around the field the whole time, watching everyone else shoot, watching everyone else clear the ball and score. Leave all of these things out because there is no doctor going into your body, no surgery or repair. You wonder exactly what you are including, and what you are leaving out. It seems you are including things that are medical procedures, or involve a doctor doing more than just examining your body. Either they are doing surgery, or actual repairs.

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Do you include a wrist fracture? Maybe only because it’s strange when the doctor, a man—they are all men, really, except for the nice gynecologists at the health center—reviews your xray and then looks at you quizzically. He asks, *When did you first menstruate?* You don’t follow. You think the doctor possibly is simply strange, lacking people skills. Then he explains that usually you only grow about a year after your period begins but here you are, eighteen, and your bones seem to be growing a tiny bit. When he briefly points out something that shows him that the bone is still growing, and then points out the fracture itself, you nod politely, but you can see neither. To you, it looks like an xray of a hand, of a wrist. It is exceptional because the bones all belong to you and they are lit like light bulbs.

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Leave out any vaginitis, vaginosis, bacterial infections, yeast infections, ear infections, conjunctivitis, sinusitis, bronchitis, Chicken Pox, or Coxsackie. Leave out…

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You have an abortion. The sound of the suction is terrible. The curettage feels awful. Even though your uterus is numb, you can feel it being scraped.

You have a second abortion. When it’s over you are, like the first time, crampy, but relieved. You are not regretful but yes you are admittedly ashamed.

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Leave out the times when you are very sick, with a fever or with stomach pains, food poisoning or flu, when you pass out or bang your head. Leave out getting hit or any black eyes. Leave out any fainting spells, either from claustrophobia or gastric distress. Leave out the shrinks. Should you leave out the shrinks?
You tend to the hernia repair in the last possible week before your student insurance expires. The doctor looks very young and is not communicative. You think you have some flunkie that the college insurance can afford. Your friend points out that the doctor’s title is written beneath the doctor’s name on his white medical jacket. He is something big like *Head of Trauma* or *Head Internist*. That is enough for you to trust him just fine. The doctor tells you that you’ll be a “little uncomfortable” for a day or two. You think “a little uncomfortable” means you’ll be able to fly to California tomorrow to help your sister with her newborn baby.

Again the masked dome thing over your face like the cyst surgery. What’s different here though is that you sit up on the operating room table and start to laugh uncontrollably. The nurses and anesthesiologist and assistants and whoever ignore you completely. They are masked, and they are going about their business, laying things out, prepping this and that. You laugh very hard, with surreal zeal, and then laugh even harder. The masked people are milling about you silently, as if they don’t hear you at all, as if you are not there on an operating table in the middle of the cold room, in your flimsy little hospital gown, seated upright and roaring with laughter.

When you wake up in recovery, people are moaning. Some near, some further away. The beds are lumpy with inanimate people. You think of the Civil War wounded. There is a searing tightness in your lower left abdomen. The doctor comes to check on you. He tells you that you talked all about your final exams through the surgery, which in fact took longer than they expected.
When the nurse comes to tell you that it’s time to get up, you think she is joking, but you are glad to try. Your friend helps you up and you realize the term “a little uncomfortable” is different for a doctor than for a patient. The nature of the repair, the tightness, doesn’t allow you to straighten. You hunch over, and walk lightly on your feet to avoid quick movements that cause too much pull. You creep along. When the nurse tells you that extra Tylenol should do the trick, you laugh, which bites at your staples, and then the laugh makes you cough, which really bites at the staples. You ask the nurse if it’s possible to pop the staples, or bust open the interior repair, by coughing to hard. *Teh,* she snorts, shaking her head, *you couldn’t pop them if you tried.*

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Leave out blood donations, and the times you get turned away from donating because, apparently, you’re anemic. Leave out the visit to the endocrinologist when your period isn’t coming and tests show that your blood is high in prolactin, the hormone that plays a part in producing milk. The doctor asks if you smoke. Yes. The doctor asks if your boyfriend plays with your nipples. Excuse me? Like with the cracked wrist and that orthopedist, you think this guy is simply not a people person. Plus, at the moment, there is no boyfriend. He explains that nipple stimulation can cause the prolactin hormone to increase. Oh. Or do you run and maybe your jog bra rubs against your nipples?

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You break both your arms snowboarding when you are twenty-eight. You are whisked away to the ski resort’s hospital in an ambulance that is actually a station wagon but, to you, looks like a hearse. On the ceiling of the car, two feet away from your face, someone has taped a comic strip that has something to do with injuries and vacation and
skiing. At the hospital, you’re told your right arm is broken badly—*I mean, look at it!,* laughs a nurse—and they mention surgery, which worries you because your COBRA just ran out. The nurse gives you a shot that feels like warm honey dispersing all over the pain. The same nurse puts a medieval looking gloved sleeve, mail, over your right hand and forearm. She wheels in a pulley contraption. She attaches your gloved arm to one end of the pulley, and leaded weights on its other side that tug your arm upright. You can feel the little bones in your arm quietly pinging into place, like the quiet ticking sounds a toaster makes when it’s warming up. You are astounded that this rudimentary set-up is how bones are set. You never knew.

You are not on vacation at the ski resort; you are actually working. This is the comedy side of it, where you are a hostess at a ski resort restaurant. You greet vacationing skiers with both of your arms in casts, lead them to their tables, like an actress in some screwball comedy.

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Leave out the occasional sensation that feels like a cold burning ice cube lodged inside your chest, a little to the right, just below your rib cage, like a mini laser spotlight that beams in a line through your upper abdomen, front to back.

Leave out the time you are having a pre-prenatal checkup to get a folic acid prescription because you are newly married and throwing birth control to the wind. The nurse practitioner suggests you get an MMR booster. Tell her you are good with vaccines. Tell her you are covered in the vaccine department, as far as you know, thank you very much, when really you are wondering if your insurance will cover the booster,
and, if not, it probably costs an arm and a leg. As you put on your jacket and collect your things, the nurse practitioner tells you a quick story. She herself, the nurse practitioner, had German measles when she is in the third grade. Her pregnant third grade teacher then caught the measles from her. The pregnant third grade teacher’s baby boy was born deaf, which is something that can happen to an unborn baby if its mother contracts German measles. You and the nurse practitioner both sit down. You look at each other. She has reached into you by telling you this story. She leaves the room to get the booster. You think of your eventual baby, the gooey twist of life that might attach to your uterus the way that a suction cup on an ivy vine attaches to anything solid. You take a deep breath, feeling your lungs, and how your lungs work. You wonder if one day something completely out of your baby’s control will dictate their career choice. You wonder if one day your baby will carry a burden like a deaf boy.

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You are almost past your due date and your doctor is heading to Paris. You and your husband go to the hospital at midnight on a Wednesday so you can be induced. Your cervix isn’t ripe, so you need to wait some crazy amount of time, ten hours or twelve hours, for a gel to soften it before you get the big guns of Pitocin to really get things going. Friends come to visit. You sit on a big rubber ball. You can’t have solid food, only ice chips, so your husband brings you lemon popsicles and you eat so many of them that your mouth gets raw and your tongue is burned. Little strips and pads are taped to your belly, hooked up to a monitor that monitors your contractions. You have a shunt taped onto the back of your hand with clear tape.
A day and a half later, the nurse wheels in the bags of fluid with the Pitocin. She plugs the tubes into your shunt. The contractions are very strong. You are talking fine, and then you cannot. All you can do is wait for it to be over. Your husband watches the contractions via the machine that prints out what looks like some Richter scale lie detector test that draws topography, first the Green and White mountains, then the Rockies, then the Tetons, the Andes, the Himalayas. Wow this is a big one!, your husband says, and so close together!, but the nature of the machine’s recording is that the recording comes a moment after the contraction has occurred. You know it was a big one, because it is happening inside you, and here he is telling you. You both laugh at that. You are glad he is monitoring. He would probably be very good at bearing the contractions, bearing the baby out of your body. You pretend you are him, and breathe. Very soon you stop pretending and tell him to go find the epidural people.

You have been dealing with pain now for some hours that you can’t differentiate. Where’s the epidural? When your husband goes to look, he comes back empty-handed. Where are they?, you huff. There’s no one in the hall, he says. There’s an emergency or something down the hall and they all went down there. You can’t argue with an emergency. You can’t compare yourself to that. All you are doing is having a baby.

The hero turns out to be a tall Slovenian man who comes with the needle to inject your spinal cord- a pinch and a bad feeling of pressure, with the inevitable worry that you are going to be paralyzed—with the epidural. Your contractions continue to tighten and release, your belly hardening up like a tight rock- at times you can make out the baby’s elbow, or foot, jutting one way or another-- and then releasing to a basketball. You sleep. It’s been a couple of days. Maybe three. You can’t tell.
The doctor comes to examine you in the morning. He’s bound for Paris. He shoves his hand in there. Without telling you what he is going to do, he pokes you in there, his finger, he jabs it in, to break your water with his fingertip. You feel like kicking him when he does it. Your foot is right next to his face. You feel like saying \textit{Fuck you}, and kicking him onto his back. The warm water gushes all over the place.

Eventually there’s “no progress” so you get prepped for a C-section. You are wheeled into the operating room and at this point you are so tired and epiduraled and Pitocined that you are aware, but you are in a strange state indeed. You are lying on your back on the table—you haven’t been on your back in at least three months because of the giant baby pressing on your spine—and it makes you feel dizzy. You say you feel dizzy. You say you can’t breathe. A woman, a nurse, by your head tells you that you are in fact breathing fine, she knows because she is monitoring your oxygen levels. This makes you feel better. Everyone—there are a lot of them—is in scrubs, with masks on, including your husband, as though he is one of the doctors. Your arms are pinned to the side on paddle-like extensions ridiculously like Christ’s. For a moment you feel as if you are in a complete nightmare. Masked surgeons everywhere and you can’t move! You almost wish they would just knock you out, like in the old days. A little light blue curtain of fabric at your chest, like a wall, blocks you from the sight of the incision. There is a light above you, however, and unfortunately, in the light’s reflection, you can see the doctor lifting up parts of your insides, your intestines, etc, and placing them to the side on the operating table, out of the way. You try your hardest not to look. Later, your husband explains how it looked, like a weird buffet with strange serving tools.
They push and pull as if an entire thick muddy aquarium is your belly, and finally extricate something. You can feel the loosening and then, *swip*, out comes a big thing, and then there’s a cry like a yelp. The cry sounds like the baby is saying your husband’s name, and you both laugh. *He’s big!* your husband says. The doctor shows you the baby boy next to your head but your arms are pinned down so all you can do is press your cheek to his cone-shaped head and glance at his dark eyes. They are like a seal’s. When they are cleaning him up out of your view you hear a nurse with a gliding Jamaican accent say, *Look at those eyes! Those eyes have been here before.* You are a mother now.

With the next baby, you go for a VBAC, a “vaginal delivery after c-section”. At home, you get in and out of the shower with about twelve hours of contractions. When you get to the hospital the nurse says *Oooh these are close together!* A doctor on call examines you and you are hardly dilated. Your doctor, who is a woman, a mother, and someone you like, is given an update and she gives you the choice of either going home and seeing what happens or having the section in an hour. You go with the section. You are impatient. This time, you walk into the operating room. It is white tiled and very bright. Sunlight pours in through rectangular, horizontal windows that are placed quite high up so all that you can see in them is the blue sky. It is a nice combination, the blue sky of October and white tiles. You have never been to Greece but you know this association. “Don’t Walk Away, Renee”, or a song like that, is playing on the radio. On the operating table, you hunch over so the anesthesiologist can give you a spinal. Then you lie back down. No one pins your arms down like before. Someone tests your numbness by swiping an alcohol swab across your collar bone- *Can you feel that?* You
answer, *Yes.*- and then across your belly- *Can you feel that?* You answer, *Yes, but not the cold.* He explains that just like you don’t feel the cold, you won’t feel the pain. He is right, you don’t feel the pain but you do feel a lot of tugging and pulling. Your husband is looking at your face, asking you if you are okay. You nod. There’s the blue screen curtain in the way so you can’t see anything. You can see the doctor’s concentrating masked face and her glasses. She glances over at you to see how you’re doing, then gets back to the work in front of her. Your body, from the tugging and pulling, is lifted slightly off of the table, like you are being roughhoused. You feel exactly like what is actually happening: like hands are inside your belly, pulling things around. They pull out a little rounded kidney bean of a body that screeches and coughs. They place her right near your head and you can hold her and kiss her quickly before they clean her off. *What a beautiful baby!* cries a nurse. *She look like she has lipstick on already!*

You can feel your doctor returning your guts to their places, placing them back where they belong and then jiggling them around so that they fall properly into place.

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For number three your C-section is scheduled and it is as if you are catching a train, or a plane. You pack accordingly and make arrangements. You and your husband arrive at the hospital at the preplanned time. You walk into the operating room and leave your clogs at the door. One of the nurses, motioning to your clogs, asks you if you are a nurse. Like before, you sit up on the operating table and roll forward so your spine is curved so that the anesthesiologist can administer the spinal. Again, the anesthesiologist checks you for your degree of numbness. This time, though, when the doctor and everyone is in there, it kind of hurts, like when Novocain at the dentist doesn’t kick in
enough. When you make a wincing sound, your doctor glances over the little blue curtain at you with a face that says, *Really? You feel that?* She speeds up what she’s doing and you are grateful that she is trying to be quick, but you are also uncomfortable and frightened. You grit your teeth, bite hard on your lip. You can taste the blood, then the little girl is out, pink and screaming, her little legs the color of bubble gum. When they bring her to your face you see that she is your first blue-eyed baby.

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While the whitecoats are in there with the last and fourth baby, the plan is to repair a hernia and tie your tubes. Tune ups and upgrades while the hood is open. You start having contractions a few days before the scheduled c-section. You go to the hospital because you and your doctor think maybe you are dehydrated. It’s summer and it’s been very hot. It’s a quiet Sunday and when the contractions don’t stop, your doctor comes to the hospital. She appears in the doorway of the room where you’re being monitored, wearing her scrubs. You are reading the newspaper and the two of you chat a little. You are both waiting for your husband to get to the hospital. He is ferrying the children to their cousins. Your doctor taps her foot, feigning impatience. You smile at her. She lifts up her scrubs to reveal a full piece bathing suit.

During surgery she looks at you over the little blue curtain to tell you that she can see the hernia and she wishes she could just fix it. Since this isn’t the scheduled c-section, the hernia man is at the beach. Then she makes her eyes all buggy and freezes her face as if she almost got hit by someone on a bike. It’s comedic enough that you are not worried about something gone gravely wrong. *Your doctor is very pleased that this very smart baby decided to come out today,* she tells you, speaking through her mask. She explains
that there is a “true knot” in the umbilical cord, and that it can cut off the blood supply as the baby grows. Instead, here he is, another American boy, this one blonde and tan with jaundice, looking light and agile already, like a tiny Californian surfer.

She tells you that she’s tying the tubes. You can smell cauterizing. She tells you your ovaries look great.

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Don’t include the sprain when you roll your ankle running in the woods. The leaves are everywhere, yellow, covering the path.

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Now it’s falling apart. What is this idea that you have? What is it that you are writing down exactly? You are not saying enough to give it a point, yet you are saying too much for something pointless.

Don’t include the broken toe when you kick the shopping cart wearing only a flip flop. Don’t include the pain in your chest that you become convinced is gall stones after your diligent googling but a sonogram reveals nothing. Don’t include the mammogram.

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Your oldest sibling is diagnosed with Celiac Disease. Her doctor tells her to tell all of her six siblings to get tested because it runs in families. It takes you a couple of years but when you finally have a check-up and ask your doctor to please order the celiac panel on your blood, he guffaws. Can you eat a bagel? he asks you, as if he’s asking you if you can spare a cigarette. You tell him, Yes, you can eat a bagel. And wonder, What does he mean? Without dying? Without gagging? You think of that ice cube feeling you get in your chest. Your sister is on top of it all with the right doctors for you to see. She
drives you to the hospital for your endoscopy. You ask her if it will hurt. She laughs. She is the mother of three boys. *It’s heaven*, she says.

You do feel like you’re in heaven when they put you in a plush chair overlooking the Hudson. An IV is replenishing fluids before the procedure and is also pumping a sedative into you so you’ll take it easy when they place you on your side, roll you into a darker room, and then drop a little camera down your throat like a tape worm in order to see the walls of your small intestines on a tv monitor. At one point you vaguely wake up, feeling calm and easy, and see the pink gooey slopes on the tv monitor-

Now it’s just silly. You are boring even yourself. You’re unsure of what you’re trying to say by writing this all down. Sometimes there’s a little vein of sense, then it goes. Plus, thinking of the endoscopy makes you much more interested in the time when your youngest three all had endoscopies themselves, one after the next, on a June morning in New York. They had laughing gas to knock them out and each one reacted completely differently. The ten year-old was a giggler as she went under. The nurses were all women, and so was her doctor. They pretended your girl was at a spa about to get her hair done, her nails painted, and her feathers fluffed like the characters getting gussied up in the Wizard of Oz. They had blow-dryers to warm up the sheets, the patient, and she smiled nervously as they placed that cup over her mouth and told her to count to ten.

For the eight year-old, not so fun. You hold her hand as the laughing gas mask is placed over her mouth and nose. Her bright eyes are looking at you with a little bit of panic in them. For a moment you want to scream, *Halt! Wait!* And scoop her up into your
arms. Her eyes begin to dart left, and right, panicking, and then they roll a little fretfully into sleep. *Okay, Mom*, the doctor says to you, *Thanks*, telling you it’s time for you to leave.

The six year-old was straightforward. You hold his hand as the mask goes on. Everyone’s talking softly and nicely to him. His eyes are on your eyes, and your eyes are on his. They are clear and clean, pure like a glass paperweight. His eyes blink, then blink again for a slower blink, then he is out.

In the recovering room, they all three wake up gradually. You and your husband divide yourselves between the three of them, checking on who’s coming out of it, who’s waking up. The giddy girl is now a dramatic cranky person, tangling herself up in her sheets with her hair covering her frowning face. The panicked girl wakes up stricken, screaming about falling down a tunnel, crying in great, huge gulps about how scared she was. Their doctor, a beautiful woman who looks like a black-haired princess, turns to you during your daughter’s crying, mouths “Oh my god I’m so sorry” with her face looking partly up at the ceiling. The boy comes out of it muttering something about a train, grunting and slightly annoyed, then asks for a gluten free cookie.

You and your husband put your arms around each other. While you were waiting for them to wake up, you’ve been looking at this recovery room made for kids with its giant photographs, one of wildflowers, one of nasturtiums, and one of clover that are mounted on the ceiling above the beds. You’ve been thinking of most of the children who occupy these beds, who wake up flat on their back after surgery. Imagining the many sad scenarios. Worrying that your child won’t wake up. Listening sideways to the Hasidic family in the section next to you with a toddler who you’ve gathered has a liver disease.
Your children are only here so that the doctor can see the walls of their small intestines now, while they are damaged, because once they stop eating gluten, the walls will grow back to health. You think of how strange it is to know you have a disease before your body even shows you that you have it, before you have any symptoms. All your children have to do is not eat gluten and they’ll be right as rain. You feel as though these three feisty, healthy kids of yours are almost an affront to this room, to the mother and father and family in the adjoining section who talk to their doctor in hushed tones.

You listen to the mother sing softly to her baby. Whatever is wrong with him, you are certain that the mother would take that disturbance into her and eat it into nonexistence if she could. You are certain that she would rather take his medical story and zip it into the place where she conceived and carried him, and hold it there, like a weight inside that lantern that you’d picture behind your mother’s scar. What’s lurking where. What we hold inside. The sheen of an animal’s pelt in the dark, slinking around corners, down into holes, and then a burst of clarity: a peony coming undone as it falls open, pricked with a bloody lip. What’s rustling around. You think about how mostly what’s inside all of us is so much more mysterious than any kind of light.
GRAVEYARD

When I ask my kids about it now, they don’t even remember. They don’t even remember! So it’s just me and my word. My memory! I should have taken a picture. I should have written something like this down right after it happened and then maybe they’d back me up. Lately I ask them, Can’t you remember it at all? Can’t you try to remember?

They look at me blankly. “You’re crazy,” one of them might say.

I tell them, “Reach out to the past, and the past will reach back to you. Reach out to your memories, and it will all reach back to you.”

They answer. “Where’d you read that, Mom? One of the teabags?” or “Okay. Thanks, Yoda.” or “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

My idea was pretty much just to show my kids where I grew up: the pretty New England town nestled by its harbor, the beach with the squeaky sand, the ocean with its silhouettes of islands with names like Baker, House, and Misery. I’d show them the white clapboard house on the hill where I lived, the youngest of seven, with my family and our
two dogs and various black cats and the railroad crossing down the hill where my mother was killed when her car was hit by a commuter train. We’d drive by the school that I went to, the park where I played baseball that was overcome by fairgrounds once a year, the stone church, Sacred Heart, where I received my First Holy Communion in a white eyelet dress with a powder blue lining and where my mother’s funeral was held, her mahogany coffin smothered in daffodils in the middle of January. We’d pass the little condo complex where my step-sister and step-mother lived when my father started dating her and the squat house where I babysat two kids after school. I’d bring them to the graveyard where my infant sister, Baby Ellen, who died at three months old, nine years before I was ever born, was buried and show them her headstone, and my father’s headstone beside it.

“Ok,” my four kids agreed, mildly, when I suggested the outing. We were visiting my oldest sister and her family just outside of Boston and my childhood town, Manchester-by-the-Sea, was only forty minutes away. My kids shrugged. “Sure,” they said. “We can go,” as if they were permitting it.

At the time, about six years ago, they were roughly four, six, eight, and ten years old. How little they were! So small! To me, at the time, they seemed so mature, so capable and grown. They were children instead of babies. They could unbuckle their own seat belts. They could read and go to the bathroom by themselves! They could tell me things sometimes that I didn’t know- facts about colors, facts about fish, things that they’d learned outside of our house, outside of me.

So there I am, maneuvering our minivan along an old, narrow colonial road thinking about how strange it is to drive along such a familiar road that I’ve never
actually driven on as a driver. My dad sold our house when I was a freshman in college and I went to boarding school during high school so I haven’t really actively lived on these roads since I was about thirteen.

“Is this an island, Mom?” asks the Buttercup, six years old, as we drive towards my old house. “Are we on an island, here?”

“No,” I answer, but I can see why she’s asking. The air is all lofty, seaside, and glittery with wind, the way winter light gets near the ocean in New England when Spring starts to near, when there’s still a little snow on the dark, muddy ground but everything is bright with sunshine and airy because of the leafless trees, the silvery sea, so that the old snowbanks look jewel-like instead of waxy, tired lumps.

“It feels like an island,” mutters the Buttercup, skeptically.

“This is fancy, Mom,” says my oldest, the Raccoon.

“Your house was one of these big ones?” asks the Mink.

“I see a boat,” says the baby Polar Bear. “Way out there.”

“This whole road is different,” I tell them. “All these houses are all spruced up.”

What were rambling, boarded up summer homes during the winter were now renovated suburban mansions with gates and Disney-esque cobblestone driveways. I steer along the old American road, Massachusettian, colonial, narrower than I remember.

We approach the new version of my childhood home. There are no cars in the driveway but I wonder if anyone is home. My kids and I look up at without getting out of the car. “This is a big house,” says the Mink.

“Can we get some ice cream?” asks the baby Polar Bear.
“It was totally different,” I tell them. “It wasn’t as ship-shape. The driveway stopped right here and the lawn wasn’t so fussed over and perfect.”

“Where’s Dad?” asks the baby Polar Bear.

“Back at home, working,” says the Mink, always alert.

“I’ll show you guys pictures. It’s totally different.”

In the reconfigured driveway of the reconfigured house, I can see how a couple bedroom windows look the same, like the eyes of someone who’s gotten so much plastic surgery that they’re only recognizable by their eyeballs. I find myself explaining to my kids where the porch had been, how an entire abandoned extension of the house that we never even used is completely gone, that my father had a rock garden and there were more trees over here, messy woods over there, and that our house hadn’t been so standard and perfect looking when we were there. It was rambling and lived in, large, yes, but not so fancy. I wish one of my siblings were with me. I look at my kids peering up at it from their seats in the car, imagining the phantom of a house that I’m explaining, maybe imagining their aunts and uncles as kids perched in various windows like a poster for some zany movie, or maybe hearing, like I was, *Gimme Shelter* streaming from the stereo all over what used to be our lawn.

But of course my kids aren’t imagining any of that. They are children, maybe looking up at the strange, generic looking colonial that, to me, looks like a man with a tight face peering down at us, like a hotel condo with shutters painted so perfectly that they look vinyl. My house, growing up, had looked to me like a tired woman lying sideways, resting, her head and her porch of a mouth all muffled in big bushy rhododendrons.
I look at the spot where the rhododendrons used to be and there is nothing there that I can identify. A piece of the driveway? Part of the walkway? I am spun around. Did the house get shifted to the left a little? I turn around in my seat and look at my kids. The older three are looking at me, wondering what’s next. The baby Polar Bear is sound asleep, his head dropped forward in a painfully uncomfortable looking position.

I unbuckle and stuff a sweater into the crook of the Polar Bear’s tiny neck and for a moment I have a strange, vertigo-like feeling that I am here, but I am not here. Which, I realize, is exactly what is happening. I’m here in a completely reconfigured space of my own past, or my own generalized memory, in a switched around driveway of a long ago house and inside a minivan with four kids I never even knew until they were born. It is like a strange dream.

It is like a strange dream, but it is also like writing fiction: picking up a story where my mind finds itself, or writing down what is hard for me to understand. Is it a lick? Is it a flame? It’s something that flickers, then comes into color, then it takes off on its own. But sometimes it’s murky, foggy and-

“Let’s see the tracks,” says the Raccoon, sticking to the plan.

I drive down the winding, unlined road, past all the neighbors who don’t live here anymore, to the train tracks. I pull to the side a little in case a car might come and need to pass.

“So,” I say, rolling down a window. “This is where my mother was hit,” I announce.

One crazy January morning, bright and clear but after record-breaking blizzards, my mother was in her red Ford Fiesta, on her way to an exercise class, when her car was
hit by a commuter train. She died instantly. We were seven kids ranging from 21 down to 7 (me).

I don’t remember if, there with my kids, we got out of the car, or what we did, or what they said. But I can picture it. I can imagine all of their faces, completely expressionless, looking out the minivan’s windows at the two tracks, the crossing lights and safety boom that lowers as the warning bells sound (which were not there the morning she was hit), looking at the bend in the track, the woods with no leaves, the large marsh the color of straw and maybe a white egret in its small S stance that maybe straightened out and flew away since our parked car scared it. I can imagine their faces, and what each of them might have been thinking- How far would the train push a car before it stopped? Could she have somehow escaped? It must have hurt so much and that scares me. What do the trains here look like? But I don’t know what they’re thinking, and, in fact, I don’t remember this actual moment anyway. But I remember pulling up to the spot, the carful of us.

Last stop was the cemetery with Baby Ellen and my dad’s headstone. Baby Ellen died at three months old- no reason- in her bassinet on a warm, sunny January day on the porch where my mother had placed her for some fresh air. She was the fifth child born of my parents’ eight births (seven being alive). I’m number eight. When I was younger, I used to wonder if Baby Ellen had lived, would I have been born? As children, whenever we did a family portrait, usually a lineup of everyone by height, Baby Ellen, with wings, would be drawn amidst the clouds.
“Ok guys,” I say “I think we’re at the wrong cemetery.” We’ve looked all over for the headstones, side by side, flat to the ground. I text my sister and brother because, after looking around, we can’t find the headstones.

The Polar Bear cub is pulling pine needles off of a branch. The Mink is gently singing to herself, watching a squirrel. Close beside me is the Buttercup. I can feel her waiting for me to look at her face. When I do, she says immediately, her face painfully squinched up, “I really need to pee.”

“Why didn’t you go at the café?” I ask.

“I did,” she winces.

“Of all the moments, when we’re looking for graves? “

“It was the hot chocolate.”

“What about the woods?” I ask. “Want me to come with you?”

“It’s so cold!”

The Mink comes over to us calmly. “Come with me,” she tells her little sister, taking her hand. “Maybe there’s a cup in car.”

I can hear them as they walk away. “Boys are so lucky,” says the Buttercup.

“You can go in the woods,” says her older sister.

“I know but it always goes down my leg.”

First my sister texts the name of the cemetery that we’re already in. Then, quickly, No, School Street. My brother texts, School Street.

“Dang it!” calls the Raccoon. “I thought I found them, but it’s not.”
At the next cemetery, there’s a very old area. Many of the stones are very old, thin and brittle, Puritan and sinking into the ground. They are narrow headboards, tipping forward and back, like teeth that need straightening.

“Creepy,” says the Mink, who enjoys creepy thing.

This time, we set out with a plan. The Raccoon, the Mink, and I split up and start with the outermost graves, then move in while Buttercup finds a copse of trees to finally relieve herself. The little Polar Bear wanders and climbs fences, but stays close.

Pretty quickly, Raccoon finds them. “Here!” The two headstones are near a bordering fence. On the other side of the fence is a golf course. We all gather around.

“Look,” says the Raccoon, “a golf ball,” and he places it on my father’s stone. My father was cremated. He never got to meet any of my kids. As he was dying of cancer in California, he requested that some of his ashes be placed here, next to Baby Ellen.

A gust of wind lifts up our hair and the bottoms of our coats. I raise my eyebrows at everyone and they smile.

I take out my iPhone and take some picture of the headstones. The light has gone lavender on them and they look like a cross between pale granite and white marble. I send a picture of them to my husband and siblings. Wow, responds one. Beautiful, says another. Sad but sweet.

When I look down at the graves again, there’s an assortment of little items next to the golfball: two pinecones, a piece of a glittery Christmas ornament, a Nerf gun’s orange sherbet-colored, navy-tipped bullet. My four kids look down at it all.

“Did you guys just do that?”

They all four look at me blankly like, Who do you think?
“What did the baby look like?” asks the Buttercup.

“I think she was dark, like the Racoon and the Mink.” My family is half dark, half light.

“Why did she die?” asks the Polar Bear cub. Since he’s only five he’s probably thinking, like I did as a kid, *oh, she was barely alive anyway*. When we’d draw portraits of our family as kids, usually whoever it was would draw our mother, our father, and then the kids, by height, down the line. Baby Ellen would be up in the clouds, winged. When I was little, I considered three months of living as barely counting as a life. As I got older, of course, I saw that differently. When I had my first baby, the Raccoon, however, who at three months seemed more life-filled and character-driven than anyone I had ever known, my feeling towards my dead sister, and my parents, transformed.

“Now what do we do?” asks the tiny Polar Bear.

“We stay right here and keep them company for a little bit,” says the Mink.

The Buttercup makes a small face at me. “I still need to pee a little,” she said.

“Let’s try to think about Baby Ellen,” says the Raccoon. “And Grandpa.” It pangs me when he says Grandpa even though he never knew him.

“Let’s hold hands,” says the Mink.

“Good idea,” I say, and take a meaty kid hand in each of mine.

We are a ringed rosy, all looking down. I wonder what the four of them are actually thinking about. I wonder what they are actually imagining, if anything. What will happen? How do all these things in our heads make anything happen? I look at all the graves, all the dead people, then my kids. Not a soul is around, but there are headstones everywhere, and windows in houses all around us. We can hear some cars on School
Street in the distance. The five of us are here, together, standing on the crust of this earth and I imagine peeling back the ground to see all the different caskets and vessels of stories, these cocoons of every single body, and then within every single mind that was there, every single memory that left with them when they died. Looking at my four kids, their bodies containing them, and all of the headstones marking each person’s life, and then, around us, all the windows and the lights getting turned on in them, probably in one of them a woman is sitting down to read the newspaper, in another, a new mother might be nursing an infant, watching us, wondering who we are and what dead person we’re visiting. In another an old man is possibly near death, glancing up at the glow in the sky and thinking, I’ve lived a fine life and this, this lying in bed, is no way for me to live. I am ready now. I am ready for whatever happens next.

The five of us are quiet, all in our own minds. So imagine our utter surprise and delight when, amidst the fading lavender light and soft, spring-like but smelling-winter wind, our hair blowing into our mouths and the squishy mud seeping into our sneakers, imagine our utter surprise when a cloud-like little baby, too young to walk but standing anyhow, stands up between the flat headstones and squints her little nose at us, stomps her squat padded feet, and smiles at each of us, clapping her hands and laughing in gurgling glee.

She is a toddler, looking mischievous and lively, standing round in the midst of us so that we can pick her up and hold her, and love her, and watch her carry on with the life that she never got to have, and that we are here living.