Sasquatch

by
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For Peeg
Not So Bad As We Seem

We come in from the south, up the highway, in cars with chipped windshields, and descended into the bowl valley where two rivers meet. Or we come down from the north in a small plane. Or from the east or the west by any means necessary. Or we’ve always been here, at the center, thanks for asking. Look, it’s summer now and clear and we can see as we sink into it, the edges of the valley like a bolded line. We can see the bumpy green hills around the town, dark against the white watermarks of twinned and tripled peaks. If it’s winter, the hills are white too. If it’s the lightning moment of fall, they’re a myriad. At the Y of the rivers that are fast and wide, there’s a mill and it smells like pickled eggs on fire. But now you’ve arrived so we look together and think the pale plumes it puffs out are kind of beautiful because the sky is so big it touches everything, including the mill’s grey smoke stacks. The stacks’ lips exhale the clouds. It’s a summer day and the skies are most compelling when blue and skittled with white.

Listen: let’s say there’s something about intersections. And let’s say we don’t mean little ones. We mean big slabs of cross-country trucking routes or dueling schools of ocean bound salmon or trees so young their bark is sweet and trees so old they’re technically stone. We mean opposition. We mean crosshairs. A bow. Something kind striking something cruel, or vice versa, in the center of a round crater dug out by a glacier. Bull’s-eye. We mean there’s something to be said about intersections that are big and carved, and would you just sit still for five seconds and let us get it out?

Just look at how we live. Building mansions on acreages for what the big cities pays in rent. Parking trailers behind cesspools where bloated bodies float like fishing
bobs. Those are our trailers and our cesspools and our bodies or the bodies of someones we love, or the someones loved by the someones we love. We own half the townhouses in town, and all of the new developments outright. We sprawl. We gaze over the city from our fifth floor apartment windows. The wrong kind of cleaner has streaked the glass. Stretch that neck a little and look down the road with us to where it dissects the horizon. There’s no pavement over there, just the sky and then dirt until the Arctic Circle. That’s a joke, we’re nowhere near the Arctic Circle. We’re funny like that. We’re on the lake. The sun sinks and changes our faces: a doctor, a stump, a bear. By the fire we’re elemental and flickering. Dark pools reflecting light.

You should know that we raise things here, and it’s the best thing about us. Our dogs are wolves and our cats are foxes, silver and quick, stealing boxes of pizza, nipping the fingers that feed them because we’re being slow and full of ourselves. Luckily we have pups and we’ll give them to you for free in a cardboard box. We don’t know how big they’ll get, but judging by their paws—we keep all of our childhood friends. Up the hill, there’s a crowd with our names in their mouths. There are drums in our chests, and hair down our backs. There are differences between a good braid and a bad cry. There are ghosts here, it’s their land you’re treading, tread softly. Tread softly, it’s our land you’re treading. We’re trying to show you how to hold a ball, bend your elbow and knees, breathe and release.

You should know that we kill things here, and it’s the best thing about us. Let’s say there’s a nine-point buck and we’ve got a ticket for just that and we’ve been steady with our breath and time. We know the kickback and we’re ready for it. We know caution in animals and in ourselves and we’re patient. We’re the most patient people you’ll ever
meet. We’ll kill and mount the wary and the unsuspecting. Watch how the buck’s head
snaps up and how we look at its heart not its eyes. Our quickness on the trigger is a
mercy. Our shoulder might ache for a week.

But really, you know how we are. How we love and hate our name. And how the
truth is we’ll rally around damn near anything. Let’s say this is about a kind of spirit that
is only here, where we die very young, often in flames. That’s not a cliché, that’s another
truth you need to know. We lost someone just last week, and before we knew it, there
was that thing again, that thing about intersections. What we can tell you is what
happened to them was familiar the way all sickness is familiar, in that each time you are
sure that you are dying. Don’t come here if you’re afraid of death. Come here to learn
how to be kind in your tragedy. We will teach you how to do this. Will mind your laptop
while you run to the bathroom. Will help fish your passport out of a manhole. Will hold
your hair while you puke. We will stand under our world’s largest fly fishing rod, world’s
largest man made of Blue Spruce, world’s largest imitation tree crusher, with our hands
and knives on your heart.

Let’s say this is a love letter from the communal romantic. We are searching the
glassy water, interrogating nature so that we may reflect on our own lives. Mountains are
just mountains. Trees are just trees. We are the proof of this place’s dimensions. Maybe
this is not as written as you think it is. Maybe there is nothing theoretical about us. Let’s
say perpendicular, incremental lines always meet twice. You’re in our sights, the point at
the center. And now you’re just stalling. So go ahead kiddo, speak up. Or pack your shit
and come home.
You I Remember

I still fantasize about you and your many iterations—a sunburnt face, a sweat stained hat, asking me sincerely if I wanna chill—so no, I wouldn’t call myself an adult. But I’m thirty-one now and you’re however old you are and I think that must mean something.

The day after my Dad died you sent a bouquet of assorted exotic flowers to the house with a card addressed to my mother. You’d only met my Dad once, but the card said you thought he was a pretty cool guy. I thought about you Googling flower shops in Prince George from your apartment in Toronto that I hadn’t actually seen and then arbitrarily picking one and asking them over the phone about delivery charges. I wondered if you’d accounted for the three-hour time difference when you called, if you somehow remembered my parents’ address, or if you had to look it up.

Do you remember when we met? It was July and the air was choked and hot from record forest fires sweeping the whole northern interior of British Columbia. The fan didn’t work in the Generator Cabaret, or maybe they just didn’t have one, either way, we were flushed and sweating. You bumped into me in front of the smoke machine and said, hey, I know you, you’re Tasha, and I felt nervous. The DJ kept accidentally replaying Temperature by Sean Paul and shouting his DJ name like he was afraid we’d forget it. I forgot it. I keep calling him DJ Windswept in my head for reasons I can’t explain.

We were out that night with the whole team of limnology student researchers. It was a Thursday and the university was, for the most part, not in session, so the Genny wasn’t exactly bumpin’. But you being you, feeling adventurous after a particularly
languid day sampling algae from Tabor Lake, snuck a homeless guy in through the back door. You named him Jeff, and then proceeded to buy him a lot of warm beer. Jeff let you borrow the sling from his arm when you dared him to grab my ass in front of the stage, which he did, he really, really did. You flung your head backward and laughed. I watched your Adam’s apple bob up and down through the thin, wet skin on your throat, and forgot for a minute what it was like to live in a three-bedroom house with a dying man. I punched you in the arm that was in the sling and you clutched it in mock pain, pulling the sleeve of your t-shirt up to reveal your large sugar skull tattoo, at which point we both knew I’d be yours.

Or maybe that was a different you. Yes, that’s right. Not you you, but the you I met in high school, before any of it, when we were both working at Nechako Meats. I was well-spoken and exotic looking so I worked at the till, but you were tall and skinny and your eyebrows were too big for your face and customer service, so you worked in the back. I liked how the bush of them met in the crease at the top of your nose; it made you look young yet dastardly when you smiled, which is an aesthetic and word that has always been attractive to me. So that day I walked back behind the glass and into the room with the slicer in it to get something and told you I didn’t have a ride home when I actually did. You drove me on your fifteen-minute break in your orange Jetta and said that you didn’t want to be a virgin anymore. I said, me neither, and you said nothing.

And you’re right; you were very clear with me from the beginning. You said, in your three-person dome tent at the Purden Lake Camp Ground, after the wine coolers and the quick friction of sex, that you didn’t want me to be your girlfriend. I said that was
cool, I didn’t want you to be my boyfriend. I totally meant it, but we both knew I’d be yours.

The thing is, it’s 3:38 in the morning and the power’s gone out across the city of Montreal. I’m awake and not in my bed because I have bedbugs for the third time this year and the awkward lumps in the couch are making my backache right in the spot where the bites itch. A snowstorm is blanketing the entire eastern edge of the country; which means the already tentative classes of my third and final attempt at an undergraduate degree are cancelled, and the exterminator won’t come until tomorrow between 9:00 A.M. and 10:00 P.M.

I’m scratching up and down my arms rhythmically until they ash under my nails, and staring at the power bar on the top right-hand corner of my screen. I’m cold because this blanket is actually a rug. I’m sick because I ate too much cheese too close to lying down. It’s too dark to sleep. The heaviness of the exposed brick in the living room makes me miss my bedroom window and all of the strangers that stare into it from their bedroom windows and you.

You weren’t actually there for this but when I was thirteen I went with my parents and little sister to the double feature at the Park Drive-In Theatre. I don’t remember what the first movie was, although it was probably kid-friendly because the first movie always is, but the second movie was The Blair Witch Project. Two things about that night have stuck with me. The first is the final scene in The Blair Witch where they’re in the house/cabin or whatever and the girl finds her friend in the basement with the light of her
flashlight and camera. He’s just standing in the corner, you see, with his back to her and his face pressed into the place where the two walls meet. She keeps crying Michael, Michael, but he never turns around.

The second thing was that the night was so black after the movie and the road back into town wound around and over Garvin Canyon so many times that I thought we’d end up back where we started. There are no streetlights that far out and no traffic either. All of the aspen trees caught the white in the headlights as we drove and then whipped away behind us which looked eerily just like the scenery in the movie. My sister, seated in the front bench between my parents, a precious nine-year-old, broke first. She started sniffing back tears while my mother squeezed her tiny, pink shoulders. Even my Dad’s hands were shaking as he turned the brights on and tried to follow the invisible curve of the road. In the back seat, I pressed myself against the fogging window and pulled the shoulder strap until it locked tight against my chest. It was the second-most scared any of us ever were.

Anyway, I digress. Do you remember that time we had sex in the company van outside of the Coast Hotel? Out of necessity of course; piles of our fellow sales associates were drunk and passed out on our beds in both our rooms. It was the end of the summer after I’d dropped out of my first attempt at a degree and the start of my first real job.

It had been a long day of leadership training, maybe fourteen hours. I was straddling your lap on the bench of the back seat with my shirt off when you told me about your ex-girlfriend, the one that gave your best friend the hand job on a snowmobile once. You looked right at me and said that I’d restored your faith in women. I said, I
can’t believe we’re finally doing this. You said, We could have been doing this the whole time? I said, Yeah, definitely. You said you’d told Scott that you thought there might be something happening between us and Scott said, No man, she’s like that with everyone.

Later, I told you that my dad was sick and that I was adopted and had never/would never meet my biological parents. You said you’d never slept with a black girl before. I said, me neither. Then the sun came up but the windows were steamed because of the sex. The pulp mill had made the air quality bad so we couldn’t really see out anyway.

Of course the longest I ever spent with you was doing a gig planting trees in northern Alberta, two years after my Dad died, and one year after my mother had officially gone crazy. Two and a half months total, me and this You. The only time we ever actually worked together was the very last day. The camp supervisor put our two crews on the same cut block so we could push late and close the contract. The sun was close to setting. You had black dirt coming out of your nostrils and a Band-Aid on your left cheek. It started to rain and you lamented, in your adorable Australian accent, the difficulty of trying to flirt with me while looking like wet Nelly. You could make anything funny.

Back in camp, around the fire, with the rest of camp, and after our millionth beer, I drew a purposely ugly picture of you with a black permanent marker on a little piece of damp cardboard. You laughed and put it in your wallet and I said no, don’t, but you said you were going back to Australia, the motherland, and we weren’t going to see each other for who knows how long. And then I said I was tired and ready for bed and left, but you didn’t follow me.
At this very moment, I’m resigned to the way snow builds up in piles when I’m not looking and the fact that I may never sleep. I think it might be getting light out now, not that I can see through this brick, it’s just a feeling that I have. My mother has posted a link on my Facebook wall to her latest, favourite psychic medium’s website, even though it’s been six years already since my Dad died and I begged her to stop. My sister wisely took Dad’s ashes with her when she moved to the Yukon to teach high school History with her also-teacher-boyfriend. She is crazy busy now and never returns my calls. There’s twenty-two percent battery left on my computer.

I want to know what you look like and where you are.

Outside of my apartment, the wind is sucked through the thin corridors of the city so hard that it screams.

That reminds me, there was once a you that didn’t matter. The one I met in a Blockbuster Video when we were both, like, twenty-two. I was looking for the movie Fear with Mark Wahlberg, and you were with your tall white girlfriend looking at me. Your tall white girlfriend caught you and whined that she didn’t like any of the movies near me.

She caught you staring again and stomped off into the Action section of Old Releases.

She caught you again and ran out of the store. You followed her.

I came outside and you were sitting on the curb by my car, which was the only one left in the parking lot. Even then the popularity of video rental stores was waning. I
sat down beside you and we watched fully loaded logging truck after fully loaded logging truck head past us down Highway 16 West. You said you were sorry and that your girlfriend was being a real bitch. I said, you know I don’t know her, right? You took that to be a challenge I guess and stood up. At that point you were still trying to be a good guy. And maybe you still were but then I stood up too and licked the roof of your open mouth.

Back at my furniture-less apartment, when you couldn’t get it up, I told you my dad was sick and I was considering moving back home. You said you were sorry about that and kept looking around like your girlfriend might be hiding in my closet or behind my drapes. I made them myself with old Mickey Mouse bed sheets.

At the door, on the way out, you said your name was Mark— not that I asked.

But that wasn’t the last time I saw you. No, the last time was two Septembers ago in Toronto. You lived near College and Spadina, which meant nothing to me, I don’t know Toronto at all, but it sure meant something to you. You’d finally given into the fact that you were balding prematurely and had shaved your head. You wore Wayfarer Ray-Bans and a thin T-shirt and short pants when we went to that bar, Einstein, even though it was evening and getting chilly because fuck, you’re cool. Which is why I had to make up the story about flying across the country to see a different Childhood Best Friend and not just you.

I finally saw your apartment that night and even met your roommate and also, unfortunately, his parents the next morning because he was in the process of moving back home. You introduced me and my day-old clothes and un-straightened hair and said, this
is— for a moment you forgot my name. You laughed and explained that you really did
know me, that we’ve known each other our whole lives, but you just weren’t good at
thinking in the morning. The parents and I laughed but the damage was done.

You went with me as far as the bus that goes to Pearson International Airport
because I asked you to. On the trolley to the bus a schizophrenic woman came up to my
face and yelled that I was an idiot! and that she knew what me and Obama were up to.
You leaned your head on my shoulder, said you missed my dad. Then you put on your
Ray-Bans and rested your hand on the inside of my knee. There were only a few round
white clouds overhead and everything was bright again. I pressed my fingers onto the
tops of your fingers and thought maybe we were in love; that you were mine and I was
yours.

Another time on the bus to that same airport, I saw two small children, a boy and
a girl, eating from clear bags of five-cent candy. The little girl spilled her bag out all over
the floor of the bus and started crying, and with no hesitation the boy cried too, even
though his candy was still in his hand, intact. And I realized back then, on the trolley,
with you, I had only been pretending.

It’s 7:00 A.M. now. A mouse just snapped in the trap I set behind the fridge and
won’t stop squealing. I’m hungry, my nose is running, and I think I have to pee. These
are honest sensations entirely unrelated to the thing about the mouse.

The psychic lives in Nova Scotia, I’ve discovered, and his name is Russell. My
mother says in a private message that she’ll be cashing in her RRSPs and flying there to
see Russell at the end of the month. It’s 4:00 A.M. her time, so I guess she can’t sleep either.

Russell’s website has a picture of a t-shirt with the word Psychic! written on it that ripples like it’s blowing in the wind. Not this wind, of course. This wind would tear it to pieces.

Maybe it’s that I don’t know anyone here. It’s hard to make school friends at my age and I’ve yet to find a job. I’m not qualified, they say. I have a long resume and too many first years of a degree. I come across as uncommitted—insincere.

_Squealing, squealing._

Alright, okay. I’m up and shivering, heading toward the fridge. If not now, when?

I need to move the fridge to get at the trap. It’s heavy, of course, and when I pull on it, the fridge lifts up a little and comes towards me, and in the moment that I feel its weight against my palms I get this flash-like premonition, a blue blight across my vision: the fridge falls on me, and I lie there, splayed beneath it, my breath short and fast as a pinwheel. I can’t scream because my chest is crushed and bleeding and all that comes out are squeals that nobody hears but me. I let go of the fridge and it thumps back onto all fours, safe and still as ever. I run back to the couch and crawl under my rug.

My laptop is almost dead. The mouse squeals have begun to fade. But the wind, the wind is deafening.

I wonder if you’re even listening to me anymore.

Well, if you are, I should tell you that I lied. The last time I saw you was actually a year ago, at your 24th birthday party in East Vancouver. You were skinnier than any
other version and living in a house with five other guys. One lived in a closet in the basement and paid $30 a month rent. The other four were in the same punk band. At the party I met your best friend, who was one of the four in the band and also really into Oxy. He told me he knew someone I used to tree plant with back in the day. Turns out he was the boyfriend she cheated on with Devon Folke, the eldest of the five famously handsome, big-dicked Folke brothers. He said, she went tree planting and cheated on me, and I said, well yeah, but with a Folke. The look on his face made me think you and I weren’t going to work out.

Which is not to say that I wasn’t trying, because I was. I had taken the weekend off from work at what was to be the last in a long line of bookstores, bought three frozen pizzas for my mother to eat, and driven the nine hours down from Prince George to surprise you. But you were so surprised that, standing in your kitchen, with everyone friend you’d ever known and me, all you could say was, hey you, and then you patted me on the back like I was just that one person you sometimes talked to after psychology class, which I realize is how we met, but still. Eventually we played Cards Against Humanity and you got drunk and took enough pills to forget that you weren’t all that into me. You kissed my neck and said you were happier than you’d ever been and that you were definitely going to shave off your beard for me. You told me life isn’t easy. You told me you only fucked other girls because you were afraid to sleep alone. When I had to take out your penis and hold it for you so you wouldn’t piss yourself under the flickering light of the basement bathroom, you retracted your earlier statement, insisting that this was actually the most miserable you had ever been. I texted my sister over the sink while
you puked in the shower just how bad it all was and she said, whatever, I told you this would happen.

At around midnight there were fireworks outside which was weird because it was mid October and nobody had any idea why the sky was lit up. You missed it because you’d already passed out in your bed.

At 4:00 A.M. I woke up to your hot breath and your ex-girlfriend, now your current girlfriend, sobbing against the bedroom door, saying, just fucking let me in.

I think sometime in the haze of tonight, as I was counting the darkly shaded bricks on the wall in front of me, I had a dream about you, the same dream I usually have, where we take that road trip up the Alaska Highway to Liard River Hot Springs that we always talked about but never did. We rent a car and a room in the lodge (which is there, I checked), and stay for what feels like three nights. On what I would say is the second night, we sneak out of the lodge and into the hot springs and find that spot my friend Jackie told us about, the spot where she claims she lost her virginity to that French guy. It’s easy enough for us to find because of the overhanging log that she carved her name into. And we carve our names right over top of hers and it’s just like that time we had sex in my sister’s bed because fuck her miracle life.

It ends in different ways each time, this dream. We’re never where we want to be for very long. The important thing is that you always cry. You always beg me to stay.
I’d like to say I never knew that it was wrong, that you tricked me somehow, just like the elderly Quebecois landlord of this apartment, but you didn’t. Really, I knew we were garbage from the moment I told you my dad was dying.

I was twenty-four and you were nineteen. You went back to the States over Christmas break to see your parents that didn’t approve of me for cultural reasons. I texted you from a particularly stained corner of the emergency room. Doctors said my Dad would most likely be dead within the month. You loved the Seattle Seahawks and you knew he hated them, so two days later you texted back, well, I hope he’s around long enough to see the Seahawks’ championship parade ;). You were too young and far away from all of it and me, I knew that, I did.

And I swear I still know it, but I’m wavering.

I’m thinking that I live alone, and tomorrow, which is actually today, I’m going to have to find the strength to move my fridge, find the small body of that mouse. Then I’ll look it in the eyes, because somebody should, and pry it out from the tight pin of the trap.

I never told you this but when he first got back from treatment in Vancouver my dad asked me to kill him. He was in the hospital in Prince George and the radiation had made his face swollen and soft like he’d been stung by hundreds of bees. He waited for my mother and my sister to leave the room, which they did frequently, together, loud and teary and trembling. He said through his teeth that if I didn’t do it he’d pull the tubes coming out of his chest and hands up and around his neck and do it himself. He said, Tasha. He said, please.

I never told you that because you were never there when I needed you the most.
And so you’re probably wondering why I’m bringing all of this up then. Well, I figure it’s because this is me and you we’re talking about here and enough time has passed that we should both be able to say it doesn’t hurt like it did. And because each year passes like the one before, seasoned and un-apocalyptic, so now everyone we know just wanders around and into each other, remarking endlessly on how old we’ve all gotten, how tired we all are. Because for a one-time fee of $299.99, a man named Russell can talk to our dead. But mostly it’s because of the old bedbugs, and the new city. And because I can’t sleep either; I’m too afraid to close my eyes. There’s just one percent of battery left on my laptop and you know what? I’ve been wandering too, shoulder first through crowds, trying to knock into you hard enough that you stop and look at me, just like I always hoped, smiling that smile of yours that’s equal parts patient and condescending and saying just loud enough for me to hear, okay, Tash, okay.
The Irreversible Present

He is here, at the Bon Voyage Inn off the highway, in the Doug and Lise Fetterly Events Room, for the Northern Interior chapter of Spinal Cord Injury BC’s annual Christmas party. Yes, here, alongside his wife of twenty-six and a half years, and almost comically so. Him: shaven so freshly his face is bi-colored, divided at the nose into brown and browner, torso sunken and belted inside a blue knit sweater and brown slacks; with her: in that red occasions dress with the sleeves that puff out at her shoulders, hair curled and pinned, flat shoes, no lipstick. Here, and together, he knows, though they move through the strange faces and familiar names equidistant, at a constant pace, like carts on adjacent tracks. Her hand sits loosely in his; yellow as if bloodless, tentative. The hydrologist and his wife. Summoned by a handwritten invite, delivered to their home. There is something black moving in her bangs, he reaches up to flick it away. She releases his other hand, beats his reaching one to the bangs, deflects it. What, she says. A bug, he says, I think. Really? What kind of bug? Something with teeth. The hydrologist’s wife laughs at him on an exhale. He smiles but doesn’t breathe out. They are together, side-by-side, and here.

They are seated now at a table at the front of the room, closest to the tree and a projector screen, in chairs set specially for them, along with Andrew Stewart, his wife Jo, and their boy, Tyler, a thirty-four year old recently divorced C-4 quadriplegic. The lights on the tree are lit, the hydrologist can see, despite the room’s overwhelming whiteness. It is brighter than day in here, and at the centers of the trees bulbs, there are what looks like the dying embers of a colour wheel. The hydrologist and his wife, holding plastic cups of
wine, actively listen to a story about how Stewart finally got his neighbours to shut their yappy dog up last summer by mowing and weed-wacking along the shared back fence at unreasonable hours. He did this for two months straight. The hydrologist knuckles his temples, and considers downing his cup in one go.

Some people just can’t be reasoned with, Stewart tells him, some people gotta be shown.

When the boy that murdered your nineteen-year-old paraplegic son with a hunting knife because he was high and your son owed him money or said something about his girlfriend one night at a party that he didn’t like finally appears in court, you won’t go. It’s not important, the detectives and Crown lawyers will tell you, this part of the process. Your wife will go with her sister anyway in case these professionals are lying, and this part of the process is, in fact, the most important. She will report back anything significant she hears, she will say. Sure, you’ll say. She will hold your face with both of her hands, press into your cheeks momentarily, like your head is a balloon she means to pop. The door will close behind her, and you will sit at the kitchen table, listening to an internet radio station called Whisperings that plays commercial free classical arrangements of modern pop songs. You will do this while reading government reports about they hydrological consequences of ruptured Dams in China, which note issues with refuse, inland fish, and oversaturation of groundwater, which set arbitrary parameters for significance, which more than once use the word “improbable,” to describe bygone failures, which ultimately conclude that inspections are costly and people can always move.
How long has it been since they arrived? The hydrologist wonders. He is already tired. And what about his wife, what is she thinking?

Hey, you’re one of those university types aren’t you? asks Stewart, leaning over to the hydrologist around the corner of the white fold-out table, elbow to knee, eyes narrowing. Let me ask you this: what do you make of these damned protestors? I read something about all these kids down at Harvard that want extensions on their exams because they protested during ‘em. Entitled, that’s what I say. Bunch of entitled kids at that place.

The hydrologist stalls his answer by drinking more wine. Amidst this group of disabled friends, he thinks almost exclusively about his own body; the way it is a hard, displacing thing, yet somehow invisible, obscured; like an object in water. And by thinks he means feels. He means Stewart both sees and can’t see him, that the table sits directly below the heater, and the transparent current is diverging around the coarse rock of his face.

Well, says the hydrologist. He raises his cup again, sneering into the bottom of it. A little at Stewart, but mostly at himself. I’m not sure I would call black students at Harvard entitled, he finally says, mumbling like a motor into the wine. He was once one of few black students at a prestigious school. Now he is one of two black professors at a middling one. He drinks steadily and slowly. Too slowly; he can feel the backflow of wine into the cup. He hopes Stewart will jump back in so he doesn’t have to continue talking, as his presence tonight was conditional on his not having to engage socially. In and out, she had said. But the cup is empty now. The hydrologist sets it roughly on the
table. He reminds Stewart that he’s a professor of hydrology, he knows watersheds and drainage basins, but he doesn’t profess to understand the decisions of university administration, in fact, he finds them utterly baffling, atavistic, and cruel. But he does understand the students’ sense that they are in crisis, and is crisis not a good enough reason to miss an exam, Stewart? People are dying, everywhere in that country, dying, and can he say that in crisis, with bodily violence as pervasive as cops, should they, in crisis of fear and grief, not stand in the street? Is standing in the street not the very least a person should do? There is something shiny and black scuttling off the red cloth edge of the table; the hydrologist smashes down too late with his hand. Drinks slosh in their cups.

The hydrologist feels Stewart fix on his face: how you guys holding up? he says.

In the aftermath of your nineteen-year-old paraplegic son’s murder in a northern Canadian town, amidst the ticker tape of sincere condolences and tributes—in the local paper, on the high school billboard, at the university basketball game—you and your wife will sit in a Tim Hortons in the late morning and consider divorce. You will say, in a practiced voice, that you don’t know what to remember, and what to forget. You will say, Maybe it’s for the best. And laughing: now or never! You will not admit your cowardice, but you will rub your eyes and pull at the coarse hair on your face. Caress the ingrown bumps. You will think about the chair in your basement that you have yet to donate to some other needy and injured person. That you will never donate because it’s not yours to give. It’s one of a kind. With hand-painted flames on the sides, and an ever-loosening spoke that caused the hissing sound when he used to wheel by. Your wife will clutch her
chamomile tea no sugar in two hands, hold it up to her nose as if she only means to smell it. Through the steam rising from her cardboard cup, she will look at you wholly.

If we do this, she will say, I don’t think we’ll ever see each other again.

The hydrologist glances down at his hand, having felt his wife’s withdraw under the table. She smiles widely, and crinkles her nose at Stewart, rolls her eyes and shrugs dramatically at Jo, trying to make up for her husband’s outburst, and avoid the question Stewart just asked, possessed, as always, by an errant politeness. Tyler, noisy, effortful, shifts his weight in his chair so that he can lean on the armrest opposite his controls and guzzle his beer. The hydrologist notices for the first time that he’s grown a goatee. Likely a function of his wife leaving him for a mutual, able-bodied friend. Tyler crushed his spinal cord nine years ago driving an ATV drunk in the woods with his boys—wife stealer included. The hydrologist realizes this is how the seating has been arranged, perhaps unconsciously: by length of membership to SCIBC, which, for most, is essentially length of paralysis. Forty people are seated by seniority of the instance of lesion. Tyler chugs his whole beer and hoots a little, looking at the hydrologist wildly.

It’s Jo who breaks the eventual silence. Now Andy, she says, with the mottled, breathy laugh of an aged smoker, look what you’ve gone and done. It’s Christmas for Pete’s sake. And you’re talking politics! The hydrologist finally breathes out. He is sick of these people. He wishes he were actually invisible. Infinitesimal. He touches his burning cheeks with the back of his hand, while his wife responds beautifully because she is always trying. She is a teacher and a medic. These men, she says laughing along with Jo, harder than any of them deserves. What will we do with them? The hydrologist looks
at her, and she looks back, bugging her eyes at him, not unkindly, but so that he knows
that the conversation is over. The hydrologist sighs. He should be drunker. He excuses
himself, getting up to go fetch some more wine: white for her, red for himself, from the
makeshift bar at the back of the room.

When the police officer comes to your door, you will know your nineteen-year-old paraplegic son is dead. That’s not something you are going to wonder about. You won’t hope he’s there to say something else, you won’t imagine a way out, because you will know better. But you will hope, when the officer puts his hands on you, to secure you, to protect you from yourself, that he’ll beg for forgiveness. Only he won’t. No, he will eventually leave you as you are, on your own living room floor, finally stilled, because his profession means there is something insurmountable between you; it means that he can’t ask and you can’t give it. He will stand immutable as you flow around him. And how you will look up at the officer—his stiff posture, his high and tight—is how your wife looks at you now, because there is something insurmountable between you too.

At the bar now, cups in hand, he hears beneath the lulled Christmas music: Hey, how are ya? The hydrologist turns and looks down to see Harpreet, member of Canada’s national wheelchair basketball team, two-time Paralympic medalist, and thus unofficial spokesperson of the Northern Interior chapter of SCIBC. Her mouth and eyes are painted darkly. Her short hair is held back somehow, with a spray or a gel, and her thin dress is low cut, exposing her cleavage. He looks down it out of habit until he senses they both feel rightly grotesque.
He shifts and says, Liz wanted to come.

Oh, she says. Well we’re all sure glad you did. She reaches for his elbow and the hydrologist lurches away, a gulp of wine flying up and out of the cup and onto her lap.

Bloop, it says. Shit, the hydrologist says, shit shit shit! He lunges at her with reindeer napkins. Wraps a hand around the back of her thin calf for leverage, and then jerks it away. Loses balance and lands back hard on his ass. It’s okay, Harpreet says. He does not look at her, instead he looks at the floor, where a beetle, clear this time, black and iridescent, crosses his vision. The hydrologist leaps up and after it reflexively, like a bird, and gives chase—a thin cartoon of a man in a blue sweater and brown slacks.

When the former coach of the basketball team your nineteen-year-old paraplegic son used to play on approaches you at a university function your wife did not attend, you will know right then and there that you are capable of having an affair. You will see how it could be a much-needed negotiation of, yes, bodies, but also of taboos. You’ll see how it could be brief, like a dream, meant to be left in its historical moment. Friendship at first. Coffee in a coffee place. A maddening flirtation. Respite like a pool, half-remembered, an estuary in the course of life. You will not know that that the timing of these imaginings will be hysterically bad. You will message her from the kitchen, your wife fetal on the couch, writing: can’t come, and, Trent’s dead. What? She will respond, and you will delete her number and every message you ever sent.

Beetles are the problem up here, the real killer. A quarter of the hydrologist’s colleagues in the university’s department of Ecological Sciences are there to study them
and the growing epidemic. Mountain Pine Beetle is murdering the forests, sweeping through them, fire-like, turning the trees red like a premonition. In the coming months their dry husks will light up homes and protected landmarks, the fires so hot they shatter boulders into shards. The summer is just heat and smoke now, the northern towns filled with university students’ whose jobs are to saw off dead limbs, dig trenches, drop water bags, and leap out of helicopters like gulls to keep the worst of it at bay.

This is not a Mountain Pine Beetle, the hydrologist knows, but he chases it anyway; his feet stomping erratically as it scuttles across what is meant to be a dance floor, but has been reconfigured into a photographer’s stage, partially because people might want family photos, and partially for the uncomfortable connotations of the floor on this particular occasion. He stomp stomp stomps his heel after it, always just a split second behind. He stomps on a set of light up antlers that have spilled out from the photographer’s box of themed props. They get set off by the contact, and begin to sing “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer” in a sped-up elfish voice. He stomps all the way out of the room and into a hallway, where the beetle opens its black carapace, revealing a set of skeletal wings and flies off and away from him, into the darkness of an unlit stairwell that leads to goddamn nothing and goddamn nowhere. He hears tittering in the room behind him. But they can go right ahead and titter. See if he gives a shit. In the dark, the hydrologist laughs.

When your eighteen-year-old paraplegic son spends his days high on Adderall and his nights on everything else you will spend much of your time laughing. He will call you at 3:00am on a Wednesday in the dead of winter, and you will have no choice but to
go get him—so much for that faculty meeting in the morning, you’ll laugh. You will have
to defrost the engine and scrape the snow and ice off the fifteen-foot tall van in your
pajamas and boots and laugh. You will have to roll up your sleeves and ask that long-
haired kid you don’t know standing stiffly on the other side of a rotten couch in a rotten
basement to help you carry your son up the stairs. The long-haired kid will shake
nervously, say, I dunno man, I dunno, and you will laugh. Half your son’s body will be
dead weight and uncooperative. His legs will spasm, and each time they strike your ribs,
your bad knee, you will feel vengeful because you are sure it is deliberate, though you
know in your head that it’s not, so you will curse and then laugh. Meanwhile your son
will be wailing in your arms like an infant, out of breath, his throat cracking dryly. He
will want to know if it’s past midnight. He will want to know if he’s going to die. You’ll
get him in the car and he will calmly tell you, as if suddenly possessed by a sober demon,
that he needs coffee and to go to a hospital. Call the authorities, he will say. You won’t
scold him because you cannot be limiting, because that is everything else’s job. And
because circumstances prevented you from having that conversation. The one your
Jamaican immigrant father had with you about your body and authorities. Because you
were not prepared for this son’s body and its particular invisibilities. So what you will do
is laugh and tell your son that he doesn’t need coffee or a hospital, just sleep. Plus, you’ll
say, there’s coffee at home. But, he’ll say, holding up a finger, smiling, at home there are
witches in the kitchen.

There are what?

Witches in the kitchen. I don’t want to get into it.

Witches in the kitchen, you will repeat.
I said, he will say to you, rubbing his brow like a weary father, I don’t want to get into it. And then you will laugh. You’ll laugh so hard you’ll have to pull over. You’ll laugh until you feel as if your stomach is bruised and bleeding. You will clutch it. And your eighteen-year-old paraplegic son, laughing now too, will lean out the window, lap at the cold air like a dog in flight, and then vomit ice down the side of the van.

The hydrologist needs a moment to compose himself, so he sits on the bottom step of the empty stairwell. While there, he decides to take a good look at his hands and contemplate how they might be failures. Certainly, he thinks, in terms of the contract of his marriage, they have gone astray. And also in terms of size and strength, and as markers of masculinity, or the rough humility of labour. Yes, he considers, these are the soft, clean hands of pretension. Yet also, and in many respects, these are the hands of a kind of builder. He has, after all, consulted on the construction and reconstruction of modernity’s great monuments. Has helped predict the conditions by which a town in the interior could be drowned in the aftermath of a mega dam that remains the envy of the hydroelectric world. He drove by once on his way to see the damn, and could spot what was left of the town through the green surface of the province’s newest, largest lake. There were submerged stop signs; vestiges of lives ended by the government and himself as partial proxy. This shouldn’t be one of his regrets, though, because his concern was and is watersheds, drainage basins, flow, input and output, plus—people can move. They can always, always move.
When your fifteen year old paraplegic son is tasked with writing an autobiography for a class assignment, you and your wife will be called into the vice principal’s office to discuss it. And she, in her ice-white ruffled blouse, buttoned to the top, with a haircut like a bully, will show you the paper. You will read it once and put it face down back on the desk. Your wife will read her copy three or four times. In it, your son will claim to have been in a rehab center in a city down south for ten years. He will claim to have been caged. To have been tortured and molested by sadists. You will assure the vice principal that it’s not true. She will tell you that your son was caught smoking weed behind the bus loop this morning. Your wife will apologize on both your behalves. The vice principal will say she doesn’t think your son should ride the regular bus anymore. You’ll ask her what the hell she means by that. Your wife will say you are both very sorry, and that it won’t happen again. On the way home, in the car, with her hands held flat over the paper in her lap, your wife will say she can see it; the truth in what your son has written.

That razor sound the hydrologist hears is a power chair. It is Tim approaching; a C-6 quad, and acting director of the Northern Interior chapter of SCIBC while Gordon is on leave to retrace the Canadian leg of Rick Hansen’s Man in Motion tour for the thirtieth anniversary. Tim, the lover of guns; his collection of which is the only thing that betrays his wealth. A piece of chain broke off a buncher he was manning when he ran his own logging business. It shot up through the window and pinned him through the neck to the back of his seat. The hydrologist once took the time to consider the probability of such a trajectory. He got to the point of having researched the dimensions of the buncher and its
parts, and sketched the angle by which the piece flew, but then stopped, having remembered that he knew better.

Didjya get it? Tim’s left hand rests against the throttle of the chair, puffy and nearly useless. He uses the other to gesture at the hydrologist’s face, which pulls his shirt, black, with the absurd phrase “Real Men Guns” on the front, further up, revealing more of his basketball shaped belly.

You ever think about getting longer shirts, Timothy? the hydrologist asks.

And rob ya of all this? No way. Tim moves the useless hand back and forth atop the convex surface and the hydrologist smiles in spite of everything. He knocks at his camouflage hat so that it settles further down on his head. If you’re done chasing bugs like a kitten you can come out front, Tim says, we need ya. Turns out this place’s toilet is at the bottom of two flights ‘o stairs. And people been drinkin’ for sure. So guys without bags need a lift.

Nobody checked that beforehand?

Tim stares back at the hydrologist blankly. Like he’s measuring something in his mind. Eventually something like a private joke passes from his eyes to his mouth.

Yeah, bud. We did. This was the only place available, though. You gonna come give us a hand? The way says We makes the hydrologist wince. He must be drunk already. He must be out of his fucking mind. Oh, yeah. Of course, he says, and stands up. Standing relieves the vessels at the back of the hydrologist’s thighs that had been pinched by the pressure from the edge of the stairs. His buttocks had fallen asleep and he hadn’t even noticed. Blood rushes down the tracks of his hamstring as he steps, feeling returns finally as pain, and he groans in spite of himself.
The first Christmas that your now paraplegic son spends at home post-accident, he asks about his friend, the one that caused it all. Can she come over, he’ll want to know. You will not answer him, it is landmine of a question, will only blow up, maim. Loudly, to smother the silence, your wife will point out the lights you have strung up in his new ground floor room. They are white and romantic. You will have spent the full three hours he spent at the SCIBC information session hammering nails, replacing extension chords, and weaving them through like vines. Though the light is soft, your son will squint. Your wife will bring over his first gift and place it on the desk. Open it, she’ll beam. He will glare at it in its spot on the table. Your wife will undo the flub before you make it worse, removing the gift from the bag and placing it on a desk for him with lightning speed. A decorative bowl with an electric blue fighting fish in it. You’ll have to feed him, you’ll say. Your son will look from you to the bowl to your wife and back to the bowl. He will wheel himself toward the bowl, grunting with the effort. Lift his arms up and onto the desk. And then with the precision of a surgeon, his tongue poking out of his mouth, he will grunt once more, and steer the bowl with his fists off the edge, and smashing to the ground. He will not be in control his own momentum, and so will follow the bowl, out of his chair, flailing with the fish in the water and glass. You will run after the chair, your wife after the son. And this is when you will first begin to see it, peripheral, alarming, as you run forward, your arms outstretched, your son a heap on the floor.
The hydrologist and Dani’s husband, Rob, and Tim’s kid, Jared, and Andrew Stewart start transferring people up and down the stairs for the first rounds of pee. They use Tim’s manual chair he had in the back of his truck to transfer them into once they get the bathroom-goers to the bottom of the stairs, then leave them to it. But the stairs are treacherous: they need two or three of them working together in shifts to manage the weight because most of these people are adults with full bodies that were injured later in life, their frames and bones wide and heavy from a lifetime of use, and like any basement staircase, this one’s narrow. The hydrologist’s wife stands at the top, calmly directing traffic. Stewart keeps saying, whoah now, whoah now almost under his breath as they descend, until it becomes like a song in the hydrologist’s head, one of those country songs that gets in and can’t get out.

There’s an accessibility bylaw that states all buildings must have a stall equipped for the disabled in every bathroom. The Bon Voyage is in compliance with the letter of this law, just not the spirit of it—what is called architectural ableism. Dani huffs about this into the hydrologist’s face along with her husband as they carry her down. She is light because she was injured when she was ten, falling out of a tree. She is low-tone and smooth; a T-1 on the cusp of quadriplegia, legs and feet unfettered, a spine fallen free of modern medical advancements like fusion surgery and instrumentation. She is curved like a leaf. They almost drop her when she spasms and the hydrologist’s hands, unprepared for the strength of it, slip. Rob looks at him murderously, but then quickly deadens his features. The hydrologist recognizes this emotional shift. They all do. This is pity, between them all, its flow now reversed, the hydrologist knows, had predicted before
coming here. Tragedy is shared but unequal in saturation. He is heavier than his once-community. The hydrologist sinks and looks up at them floating by.

After you first see the size and placement of the spinal cord in the hospital, pinned in negative and colour-coded sequence to the many specialists’ boards and screens, you will spend the rest of your life secretly thinking in terms of chance. This kind of thinking will gain momentum in the rehab center, proliferating in the common rooms and social sites, contagious, passing between the young men and their young accidents. *Two millimeters to the left and I’d be walking. A one-in-ten million shot.* You will want to go back and measure your own bad luck, but will see how the one’s that fixate on the what-if’s whither. Instead you’ll read a lot of books. Even the ones about sex. Learn the ins and outs of replacing catheters. When your son gets his first erection—ever? You’re not sure—You’ll bump his fist, give him a whoop. Your father would have been horrified. And though you’ll try your best to keep such talk at a distance, you eventually won’t be able to stop yourself from getting sucked in. *A couple inches less of rotation and he would have fallen on his back, not his head. One minute later and I would have been out of the bathroom, would’ve stopped it.* In front of everyone the doctors and the therapists will say, We can’t know what will happen, how much mobility he’ll have, what effects on his health, but in private the will tell you the course, the certainty of it all. You will shake your head, refuse to whither. But your twelve-year-old son will not stop growing, his stubbornness, what he got from you, will settle like bent iron, cooling, and it will get harder and harder to cover his ears.
The hydrologist drops back into his seat at the table with a thunk. His wife is talking to Jo animatedly and directly about the minutia of her union’s new contract while her hands continue to sit as if atrophied, still and thin in her lap. The hydrologist drinks deeply, thirsty from his recent exertion. He looks at Stewart’s moving mouth but thinks about the beetle and how, already, he can’t remember what it looked like. He thinks he might have imagined its wings and flight.

It is time for the gift exchange, a game, where you may either choose to open a new gift from the pile under the tree, or steal someone else’s. The hydrologist feels Tyler stupidly staring at him over the top of his beer. A kid brings the divorcee new bottles, slipping them into his custom handled pocket in timed shifts, while another sweeps away his empties as if to erase what’s been done. Each beer’s the first of the night, and drunk is where Tyler starts, the hydrologist notes, rather than ends. He keeps his eyes on Stewart’s moving lips, while his face burns at the point where Tyler has focused his stare, but cup to mouth, the hydrologist endeavors to catch up.

When your twelve-year-old son gets kicked off a trampoline in your own backyard while wrestling with one of his friends, the vertebrae of his spine dislocating so that they shift and pinch the thin chord that everything is riding on until it is severed, until he’s paralyzed from his breast bone down, the first thing you will ask for is forgiveness. Which is wrong, you will remember to think later, in the irreversible present—the first thing you should ask for is help.
The gift exchange is set up by a game, in which all the gifts are placed under the tree, names are drawn, and then the selected person has the choice to open a new gift, or steal a previously opened one from someone else. Despite a rule that gift’s stolen three times are retired, a rule designed to keep the game moving, approximately two hours has passed since the start. Everyone wants the same four gifts, ones that clearly exceed the twenty dollar limit: an extendable titanium windshield brush and scraper, a set of ornately carved wooden shot glasses, a large edible gift basket with a silver bow, and a fighting fish in bowl. Electric blue.

In the lull the game’s length, the hydrologist has settled into a sleepy kind of drunkenness, and Stewart has gotten so loud. Half of the people clap and comment excessively on the gifts as they’re being opened, as if their feigned excitement might draw everyone else in. The hydrologist’s wife is one of these people. Everyone else, however, searching for something of interest, watches the scene unfold uncomfortably: Stewart shouting questions to the hydrologist about teaching, about his mortgage, about the not-so-recent local election. The hydrologist quieting. Burying way more than the event’s maximum number of wines. Stewart asks him, banging his paw on the hydrologist’s shoulder, about the water cycle.

What about it?

I’m just sayin.’ If the water moves in a circle like that. You know, up into the air and then back down again, then how in the goddamn is it that people think leavin’ the tap on wastes water?
What Dad’s saying, says Tyler, half conscious, his jaw loose, is that he doesn’t like the summer water bans. He doesn’t like being told when he can and can’t turn the fuckin’ sprinkler on.

It’s just gonna come back down!

The hydrologist pulls instinctively on the beard he no longer has. He knows that what Stewart is struggling with is futility. He shrugs at the other father in resignation, breaks his silence. Fuck if I know, he says.

But you know what, Stewart says, back to those Harvard kids.

Okay, Stewart, okay, says the hydrologist, nodding, his voice loud enough to carry across the room.

I got more to say about that, he says.

I bet you do.

No, buddy, I don’t mean like that.

I bet you don’t.

Oh. Oh, yeah?

Yeah, Stewart. Yeah.

The hydrologist drops his beer bottle down on the table a little too hard. Foam shoots up and out of the top like a volcano. A little spatters on both men’s faces. Through the speakers the final name is called, and everyone let’s out a collective sigh of relief. It is the hydrologist’s turn at last. But he doesn’t immediately move. But in the midst of this small chaos is something clear. A tiny, distinct, crunch. He lifts his beer off of the table, and sees it there, the once body of the beetle, spread into and against the tablecloth, real
and desiccated and blooming. Though he knew in his head he would catch it eventually, this was not how he imagined it would go. So incidentally.

He should, out of respect for all involved, pick the last present from under the tree and end the game. But things have become somewhat boundless now. And in the hands of a little girl across the room, somebody’s niece, or somebody’s daughter’s friend, sloshing in its ribboned bowl—

Go ahead, says Stewart, end this already.
Yes, please, says Jo.
Honey, says the hydrologist’s wife.
He stands, sways a little from the rush in his head. A river.
Nobody speaks when he takes it from her. Some don’t even look.

When your eight-year-old son, the one who has some trouble focusing in school, the teachers say, shows some propensity for gymnastics, you will think, no way. You are cautious after all, your father having always warned you about the world’s poisons. Don’t touch that, he would say, you don’t know what kind of dog pee on it. He would slap your hands, your head, your mouth. So many things trying to kill a black man, he would say, why you got to be one of them? Your wife, eventually will convince you. It’ll be good for him, she’ll say.

And it will be good, like sense. The first back handspring is what will make you change. After many failed attempts, over many Sunday mornings. You will be struck by his sustained focus. By the way he listens attentively to the instruction, how he keeps getting back up. The things everyone told you he just couldn’t do. The teacher will spot
him lightly, but stand back. His body will bend impossibly. You will marvel at how for
once, the air has no viscosity. You will consider that perhaps, there is space here.

You will buy the trampoline in celebration; it will be your idea.

The music in the room fades out, and the lights dim. Harpreet’s voice comes on
through the speakers. Hello, she says, can everyone hear me? The hydrologist’s wife
reaches back and wraps her hand around his. He looks down at the pairing, tries to guess
the weight of it in his lap.

We would be remiss, says Harpreet, alternating her gaze between the hydrologist
and the crumpled notes in her lap, we would be remiss if we didn’t remember Trent
tonight. Tim is beside her at the front of the room, in the weak aura of the Christmas tree,
nodding, his dead hand solemn on Harpreet’s shoulder.

He is not surprised when the montage of his dead son starts. He and his wife have
sat through a few already. Pictures and videos of all his SCIBC activities; before the
drugs and the burn out friends and the crisis of death. This is the basketball, the rugby,
the scuba diving, the skydiving, the bungee jumping; a gift from the association and the
Province. In the final scene, Sarah McLachlan’s “In the Arms of the Angel” plays as a
young, tan man hooks the cords up to the then sixteen-year-old son’s wheelchair. The
hydrologist’s son appears serious and still as they pull a strap across his chest, his legs, to
keep him from hurting himself when the cord recoils. He looks at the camera and smiles
weakly and shake his head in answer to a question buried by the video’s music. But the
hydrologist hears it. Are you scared? The young tan man and two other employees pick
up they hydrologist’s son and the chair, and then dump him off the side of the bridge, the son’s eyes closed, his mouth open to wail.

Though it was meant to be beautiful, it is instead terrifying. A vehicle to the moment of death. We love you Trent! in red Comic Sans will overlay the son’s flush and smiling face when he is returned, finally, to the top of the bridge, which was and is and will forever be a terrible truth. However, the hydrologist does not see this part, saved at the moment of his son’s departure over the edge by his wife, who has stood up in front of him, hardening her grip on his shaking hand. He stares at the back of her red dress as the light from the screen flickers and flows around the dense block of her body, passing him in streams to the back of the room. The show stops, the lights un-dim and the hydrologist’s wife releases his hand, walks up to the sobbing Harpreet and bends down.

Thank you, she says, that was beautiful. She says it into the microphone. She says it to him: We are so grateful to you all. This means so much.

When your son is just two you will take him on a trip to Jamaica, to be christened in the Blue Mountains, in your great grandmother’s church. This will be the first time you will step foot in the country, though you have always considered it home. You will do this without your father, years dead now from complications of pancreatic cancer.

Your wife will hug her sweat all over everyone. She will answer graciously to White Lady for the entire three weeks. Which will become six weeks because of the hurricane. You will regret coming. The rum will bring about headaches and diarrhea. No one will ask you about your school or your research or recent accolades. They will tell
you to mind your filthy mouth, and so you’ll mind it. They won’t care about all your material gains, only your beautiful high yellow baby. Your real accomplishment.

Your great grandmother will appear before you out front of her house, high in the mountains, and with a ganja-filled pipe locked between her teeth she will take your son from your arms, will wash him with cold water and lye soap in a tin basin. Your son, naked, slick with suds, will escape the basin, run down the hill behind the house and into the dense trees, squealing, and you, falling after him. When you catch him by a sudsy arm you’ll swing him up under the canopy. Kiss the soap off his cheek.

At the christening, the squealing will continue. Your wife will try her best to rock and soothe him, but your son will not stop making noise. Pointing at every object he recognizes or likes. Smashing the minister in the face with his tiny fists when he drifts too close. The minister will re-recite the prayer three times. Your great grandmother, seated in the front pew will shake her head. Child, she will say, he nuh easy. But then she’ll laugh. You’ll all laugh. And laugh and laugh and laugh until your eyes weep from the sting of joy.
Cherie says I’m too smart for my own good. I read too much, use too many big words from big books, she says. This is despite my protestations. More than once I have told her that I will not be stuck reading only Gibran’s *The Prophet* forever, like everyone else in the Community. I told her that I don’t even say most long words correctly because I only know them from sight, not from sound. I reminded her about my impediment, too. My R’s come out as W’s, because of when she hit me in the head with that stick. She was swinging at a rock, trying to bat it into a lake and I was standing too close. My tongue’s inept now, I said. *De-rhotacization.* I spread my arms wide to show her how big the book I found that one in was. She snorted when I did that. So I told tell her that the librarian I checked the book out from was a man with a mustache and a circular bald patch on the top of his head like a medieval monk. His skin was green too, I said. Perhaps a by-product of sunless asceticism. What? Asceticism. What? Ask-et-i-kiss-em. She turned from me. She was sewing an anarchist patch onto her backpack. Or maybe plucking the hairs from her legs, one by one, pressing her thumb into the ones that bled. I told the back of her head as quietly as I could that the plaster of our straw bale house is pink from the blood of all the children the Community has lost. I said this because I thought she would like this kind of story. Because I often see her watching the children through our thin kitchen window, as they chased the dogs in circles around the common area’s fire pit, and because I tell Cherie everything. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between the children—naked and muddy, covered in lice, hair matted into locks—and the dogs. The people here have bled into their background. Wild as the mangy black spruce in the bogs
that surround us, and stubborn as the small industrial city 40 minutes to our south. I thought maybe this was why she stared, her upper lip twitching. She didn’t turn back. Cherie never turns back. Does not forego incredulity for the likes of me. The little brother. The brain. Instead she always just says, Christ almighty, and the back of her shaved head wrinkles as if it is what’s doing the speaking. She says, Is this a story, Micheal, or is this the truth? Cherie always knows when I’ve gone too far, and so reigns me in. The truth is she only just left me. We are twenty-four and twenty-two years old.

When asked to speak on children, the prophet of Kahlil Gibran’s story says, *Your children are not your own. They come through you, but they are not of you.* Cherie hates that line. She rolls her eyes, growls if anyone repeats it. Fuck that noise, she says. Because our parents met when they were nineteen, at a folk music festival, in the dim circle of a hookah. Our mother’s friend dared her, before entering the tent, to expand her horizons, to accept her own capacity for impulsiveness and give her body to the first stranger she made eye contact with. Our father had dared himself to meet and hold each person in the circle’s gaze until part of his soul budded off, traveled across his line of sight and into theirs. He wanted, he told Mother, to be remembered. They communed that night in a teepee, beside a fire of burning herbs, with half a dozen other people watching through the smoke. Made the oldest, Trail, right then and there. They found a kind of purpose in the ease of his conception and birth, the defenselessness of his body. And then Moon’s. And Early’s. And Serengeti’s. At an organic food co-op on Commercial Drive, they met Rain, who told them about the straw-bale Community she lived in up north. Families like their family, with ideas about love like their ideas about love, living
together in the truest sense possible. Mother was already pregnant with Orland and Mars when they packed the whole tribe into the van. Women in the Community helped to deliver and then breastfeed the twins while our parents and other members assembled and plastered the bales of the house. Hand dug the foundations into the grassless mud. Passed the square bales up using pulley systems of rope. I saw an etching in a book about the pyramids once that I have replaced with their visages: long loose hair, darkly freckled faces, hard, cracked hands. Rain said the change in scenery and pace took some getting used to though, that the herbs and flowers were too different up north. All Oxeye Daisy and Devils Club. No Chicory. No Fragrant Water Lily. Only barks in the winter, and winter for seven whole months. Mother’s body rebelled, Rain told us. It took twelve years after the move for Mother and Father to make Cherie, and then another two to make me. But by then of course, our parents had grown tired of purpose. They gave us their own names, like lazy after-thoughts. Sometimes they forgot that was the case, and looked down at us with surprise when they called our names, our small faces angled up to theirs like Morning Glories. No, they said, not you. I was speaking to Mother. I was calling Father. We shrank away, back to our make believe games out in the trees. The Cottonwood out where the bogs became the river, with large long limbs. And we were tree people, Cherie said, people of the trees, with dirty skin for camouflage, and bare feet evolved into hooks for climbing. Watch this, she said, and dangled an impossibly long string of spit from her mouth down through the canopy, almost all the way to dead leaves on the forest floor. Of course by the time we were in the trees, the older ones had already fled into the maw of concrete capitalism. Trail became an accountant. Moon married a pharmacist and wore three diamond rings. Early went by Earl. The others traveled or
went to university or got big money jobs further north. They scoffed from behind their sunglasses and new porcelain teeth at polyamory and the hippy agenda. They didn’t come back, didn’t ask about Cherie and me ever. Why would they? We had nothing in common. Their parents were not our parents. Their parents were young and loudly dogmatic. Our parents’ skin sagged. Our parents slept all day. They didn’t even fight the Ministry when the notices came saying Cherie and me had to get vaccinated, go to school. Our Father wore bifocals, pulled their Father’s wild, filthy hair into a short braid, worked at a health food store in town. Our Mother taught their Mother’s meditation at the public pool. She took Tylenol for arthritis and sighed loudly if I cried. She said flat-toned things over her shoulder like, Come now, you’ll live. Luckily for me, there was Cherie. She was the one that figured out how to brush her teeth and tie shoelaces, then taught me how to do mine. She let me lay my head on her belly at night when I was cold. Lectured me sternly when I peed my pants. Cherie was the one that climbed the wooden counters for bowls in the mornings, tucked my pockets back in, wiped the stray oats off my face before we got on the bus.

When I think about it, really Cherie has been leaving me little by little, starting most noticeably from when we were twelve and ten, a month before Trent’s accident. In the middle of the night, early September to be exact, the weather already starting to turn. We were up Ginter’s Hill, in town near Trent’s suburban house. We walked through the beetle-ravaged pines. Me and Cherie and Trent, shivering in our T-shirts and shaking our flashlights at the trunks of the trees, defiant for the time being. I started whining about going back because we finally saw the rocks laid in a square that were supposed to be the
foundations of the old house. The Ginter family’s, we assumed. Either way, it was old and they were definitely all dead, especially the babies, Cherie said, dead bitches. Dead fucks, said Trent. The two of them were an inseparable pair the summer they both turned twelve. They were daring, trouble-seeking in a mean way. They liked to steal knick-knacks from the houses in the Community. They once stole some crafts the older ones had made for Mother, and buried them under the potatoes in the garden near the Community’s center. They liked that people might look out their windows at the garden every day, and never know what dumb pointless thing of theirs was hidden there. When I objected to their follies, Cherie would flick me on the forehead for being stupid. They often picked on me. But that was fair, since I was always there, pulling. All Cherie’s shirts used to hang a little pointed on the left side from my clawed hands. That night at Ginter’s the two of them took turns pushing each other and making low sounds at me. They knew how white their grins were, how much they looked like ghosts in the night. They took advantage of my smallness. Whispered about murder and corpses in my ear. About the way bodies and souls rot. Probably the first time I’d ever thought about dying, and fear like sickness went from my heart to my belly. I didn’t want to see ghosts and I didn’t want to die. My first tear fell silently but didn’t go unnoticed. Cherie called me a drama queen. Trent laughed, picked up a pebble and whipped it past my ear, and sometime after it knocked against a tree. Something rustled in response, and we all jumped. That was when I started sobbing, choked on the snot in my throat when I tried to beg Cherie to take me home. Trent laughed some more but didn’t take his eyes off the spot the rustle came from. Cherie put her hands on my shoulders and looked down at me. She said, Michael, shut up. The moon was white behind the trees behind her head so that
her big ears were translucent but her face was black. I could only kind of see her eyes. Just the outline of them, and the shiny reflection of light at their centers. I saw the vague shapes of other parts of her face too, like any blurry figure in a half-remembered dream. But even in the darkness I knew what she was thinking just as she was thinking it, because she and I are made of the same parts. I could feel how disappointed she was at the sight of the snot and the tears on my incessant little pincers, even if it was what she wanted. I could feel her body clicking into place, the realization that she was taller, older, the only one, and suddenly ashamed of someone she loves. I accepted then that I was a pussy, and knew fully what that meant before she even said it, throwing her weight into her palms and me into the dirt.

Father left suddenly, in the middle of the afternoon. A mere 48 hours after Cherie kicked Trent off the trampoline in his backyard, paralyzing him from the chest down. He went, he said, to go find himself with a group protesting cruise ships on the northern coast, near Haida Gwaii. He held Mother’s hand at the door like they were long-time business partners at the end of a mutually agreed upon buyout. Mother sniffled but still smiled. She understood his decision completely. Father told Cherie, I have to find out what in me, did this in you. We were just parts of our parents you see, scrambled up until homogenous like eggs. He cupped her face like he had probably done with the others when they were small, but had not with us up until that point. Cherie flinched. Father cringed. Our parents had to leave to be accountable for us. Father died when an embolism stopped his heart, and he tumbled off his watch boat and into the Pacific. Then Mother went digging in the Community garden, with her back to the house. She pulled up
previously buried baubles and shook them at us through the windows, glaring through her hair like a funeral veil. It was our parents’ fault Cherie and Trent had started playing rough together, wrestling. For Trent it was just fun, about finding the limits and potential of his physical strength. It was physical for Cherie too, but in a different way. She had grown three inches in the last six months. There was hair on her arms. White bulbs under her nipples like hardboiled eggs. Her face was constantly red and she smelled like the Community’s goat shack. Most days she wanted to kill me, and tried. After Ginter’s, she’d stopped helping me dress and eat. She’d started tripping me when I walked by to see if I could catch myself before something sharp and fated like a table or a door did. She experimented with Trent, too. She tried touching his hair once and he dodged it like a cat, frowning. She’d touch her knee against his and he would scoot down the bench on the bus. So one day she tripped him, like with me, and he looked up from the dirt laughing. He started tripping back. She’d trip him and he’d trip back two days later, looking in her eyes and saying, I never forget. Soon they were grabbing. Then grabbing and falling. Then grabbing and falling and rolling. The day of the accident he dove at her on the trampoline and she kicked him in the chest as hard as she could. He landed on the grass, on his head. Cherie said she heard his neck pop. I didn’t. Still, I hid behind Trent’s shed, shaking. Cherie clutched at her groin, she looked confused, and then she laughed and laughed hysterically even after he got hauled away in the ambulance with his nice, bawling, parents. It was hours before someone came into town and found me; they had forgotten that I was there. It was Cherie who alerted them, Rain said, asking between hiccup-like giggles, Where’s Michael where’s Michael? Rain, now the Community’s Emergency Mother, picked me up in her Oldsmobile. It was dusk by the time I got home
and I was shivering and blue. You need a blanket, she said. In the house Cherie was sitting on the floor in the cushions of the family nest, where we all slept, rubbing her legs and breathing hard, like a sick animal. I don’t know where Mother and Father were. I pulled a blanket out from under her, ran back outside and climbed the apple tree in the Community’s center in case whatever Cherie had was contagious, but also to look out for her, should anyone like the Ministry try to come and take her away, like they did when Rain’s grandson was bitten by a rabid dog. What Cherie had wasn’t contagious of course. It was genetic, a gift from our parents—the baseness of bodily impulse and an absurd faith in intent.

It’s hard to remember my first fight because of the head butt and all the head butts that followed. But sometimes, like now, it’s clear as day. It was with a kid named Justice, newly immigrated from Ghana, who said, because he was trying to make friends, that my sister was a bitch for crippling Trent. Everyone had something to say about it now that Trent was back in school, wheeling around the hallways, high as a kite, conspicuous as an open wound. I was fourteen. I head butted Justice in the shoulder though I was aiming for his throat. He got a shot in just above my eye, but that was it. On the ground, I had him by the shirt, lifting him up and slamming him back down into the grass. His teeth kept clicking against each other because his jaw was slack. My. Sis. Ter. Is. Not. A. Bitch. She was not watching the fight, though she was there, in her car in the student parking lot, smoking a cigarette, ashing it out onto the gravel. She was checking her phone and wishing I would just stop already. Why are you like this? she was probably thinking, please kill yourself. She was constantly telling me to kill myself because she knew I
should be better than I was. It was her way of saying I needed to get it together or move on. I could hear her voice repeating over the dull thudding of Justice’s head in the grass. A school monitor showed up, yelling my name. I paused, turned my ear instinctively in Cherie’s direction. Got up and ran to her. She looked sideways at me, now sweating beside her in the car, reached over and touched the bloody cut over my eye. What the fuck? she said. I’m fine, I said, just go. She wiped my blood on her shirt, threw a napkin at me. She had bought the phone and the car with the money from her job working as a night shift janitor at a sawmill. Mother, the environmental warrior, was distantly furious about this. Were we too, just going to turn on her, like our older siblings? Who? Cherie asked her. Who? Who? Who? We got home the day of the fight, I was still bleeding from the cut. I probably needed stitches. Mother didn’t even look up at us when we got out of the car. The school must have called her about the fight by then. As Cherie and I walked by her, Mother said to the ground, Violence is never the answer… the prophet said that. I didn’t tell her that he hadn’t. I followed Cherie’s lead and said nothing in response, shuffling behind her into our cartoonishly DIY house. In the house, Cherie never said another word to me about the fight. Just handed me some glue to pour into my cut, got naked and shouldered me hard on her way to the sink outside the kitchen, the one with the mirror above it, the only mirror in the house. She had an electric razor in her hand that she had probably bought with her mill money too. When it was done, her hair lay like a torn cape across her shoulders and back. Cherie stared in the mirror at her fresh baldness, her eyes like the big marbles with the sparkles in them that everyone always wanted when they were little, and gently fingered the ringworm scar on the back of her head. We had both had it in elementary school, and it had gone untreated for so long, we ended up
with a lot of coiled, hairless patches. They had caught it in the Community animals first—the goats, then the dogs. Mother and Father tried several natural remedies They were stubborn and distracted; the older kids weren’t going to be coming home for Solstice that year, none of them. No poison masquerading as medicine for their current kids then, no government chemicals in this blood. Only when the school stepped in did we go see a doctor. I was scared by his red face, the way his tie looked like it was choking him. Cherie made funny faces at me so that I wouldn’t cry. She made one in the mirror, wrinkling the skin on the round top of her head. Cherie never stopped shaving. People saw the scar and her makeup-less face and stopped teasing her about Trent. In grade 12, she started a death metal band called Axis of Ringworm that played songs with no lyrics because no one she knew could scream.

I fought all the way through high school, for any reason I could come up with. Cherie would shoulder me at home and I’d go shoulder some guy in the hallway laughing too hard with his friends. I’d always let them get a few hits in first, but after that I was efficient. I’d get them on the ground and that would be it. I never got tall, so my body was a brick and difficult to pin. I liked to leave them with a parting quote, from a favourite book, for dramatic flare. Vengeance that is slow to come is all the more complete, I would say. Soon the school was threatening to expel me, so I stopped fighting and started following Cherie to her shows and moshing with the forty or so other kids there. I grew hair down to the middle of my back. Someone at the show would always ball it in their fist and pull me back until I crashed into them. The shows would be in an older guy’s basement, or out in fields or abandoned trucking scales. They’d bring amps
and generators and wooden pallets for a stage. If I got too close, reached out at her, the steel toe of Cherie’s boot would find me, without her ever looking up from the guitar. She could always find me, and me her. We avoided home as much as possible and separately; me at school or the public library in town, and her anywhere else. Yet we always went to the weekly Community meetings together and sat by the fire. Rain was old, out of touch, and yet supportive of Cherie’s experimentation with music and aesthetic. She told us stories about our parents while Mother made the rounds, cradling second-generation Community babies, cooing in their faces and kissing them on the mouths. Cherie was always watching her, and I was always watching Cherie. One night Rain said to us, Love is such a tangled thing, and children are like birds. She said it was hard but necessary for parents to set their birds free. They needed to become whole beings after all, and that could only be done alone. They are not your own, she said. Suddenly, Cherie was twenty-years old, a woman. Her face was no longer soft in the fire’s orange light. It was angular, shadowed. Trent, her once friend, had been stabbed, murdered at a party over drugs. I’m not sure how long Cherie had been sleeping with the guy who did it. This time I knew she was going to leave me. She was drunk. I didn’t smell it until she opened her mouth. Rain quoted again from The Prophet, talked more about freedom and growth, about the logic of our parents. Fuck off, Rain, Cherie said. Rain nodded her head. She was supportive of Cherie’s anger. Somehow, I’d made it through high school, probably because by then I knew more about books than most of my teachers. I was going to graduate in June, but Cherie wasn’t going to be there. She was going to go tree planting in a couple of weeks with a company based in town and forget about this hellhole. All of her earthly possessions—a guitar, her hair clippers, an old army jacket she bought at the surplus—
were already packed in her car. Against my better judgment, I pulled at the corner of her shirt. Who’s going to be there at the thing? I asked. What thing? she said. The graduation thing, I said. I’ll be there, Michael! Rain jumped and her breasts swung wildly. She had taken off her shirt to better absorb the heat of the fire. Cherie’s face was flickering. She looked like she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to choke or hold me. Yeah, she said. Rain’ll be at the thing—she leaned forward, cupped my face with her hand, like Father, then slapped it—so shut the fuck up.

I didn’t go to university because I had no patience to do the upgrading I would need to at the college. I’d read all the books for their introductory courses and know everything I need to in order to survive even a consumerist world if I have to. Mother and Father were right about school to some extent – it’s a government imposed formality. About two years ago I started to equate knowledge with experience. I started liking the folk music that my parents had fallen in love to. Vancouver bands from the seventies with names like River, whose albums only existed on original vinyl or maybe, if I was lucky, cassette. I wrote, and still write, for a music website that actually pays me about the contribution of this kind of music to contemporary understandings of art: a purview of neoliberalism. Still, I never made enough to live anywhere but with Mother, so I stayed. Mother started staggering after Cherie moved out, and catching her became a habit. She had the shakes all the time now, had trouble digging up the potatoes in the garden and holding a pen. Mother, I said, you need to go see a doctor. I’m fine, child, she said, her body moving continuously, as if she were balancing on top of a ball. She looked out to the garden through the window, Michael, she said, remembering. Yes, I said, my face a
Morning Glory at her shoulder. Michael, Michael, Michael. She wrote long letters to Father, then lit them on fire with burning swaths of herbs. She looked at me finally, perhaps with recognition. Where is Mars’ dream catcher? she said. The one he made at the potluck once upon a time? I tried to picture Mars and couldn’t. In the photographs on the wall, I couldn’t tell the twins apart. Moon I knew because of her kids. Serengeti was very tall. They were all pretty tall. Hovering on the wall, their pictures were like stock photos, only the children had rotten teeth and dark eyes from recurring bouts of whooping cough. Trail quit accounting, got a divorce, and moved back home for a pre-midlife crisis. He winked at me in the doorway, called me Kiddo, I think, because unlike Mother, he wouldn’t bring himself to say his father’s name. How come you’re so short, he said. I looked at him and said nothing. To myself, I wondered where his black hair came from, his wide nose. I thought perhaps hookah’s and music make for confusing nights and maybe he is not either of our Fathers’ son. Where’s the plugins? he shouted. Where can I charge my phone? Trail was loud, always asking for things. And fat and hairy from an adult life of hormone filled food but Mother lay in the nest with him anyway and massaged healing oils into his temples with her trembling knuckles. At twenty-two, I leave them to it, and follow Cherie out tree planting. We work for different companies, though, because, she said over the phone, you don’t shit where you eat. I said, that’s not what that expression means. She didn’t ask about Mother or Trail or the Community. She had come home before the season started to Trail lying in the nest, looking up at her from his book about peace of mind. Cherie said, What the— and Mother said, Sssshhhhh. She stayed for a few hours, until Trail asked her if she ever had to do any follow up with the police, you know, after the whole Trent thing. He said it in a
theatre whisper, scrunching his face. I thought then that I might never see her again. She sounded so tired on the phone when I asked again to come plant with her, so I pulled back, told her just to forget it. Christ, Mike, she said, sounding like she was scratching her head. I didn’t know where she was. Fine, she said, ‘bout time you got a job. She gave me the email of her buddy that ran a crew for a big rookie mill and hung up. Cherie’s a super veteran planter, a baller, puts in three to four thousand trees a day, and so got on with a small company a little further north with unfathomably high tree prices. All their contracts are remote access, by helicopter mostly. The crew lives in abandoned cabins with no heat. Often we had no heat growing up in the straw-bale house, which grew damp and moldy after the others left, having not been constructed correctly in the first place. So Cherie thrived planting, made good money. My company had many resources. There was Internet in camp, and portable toilets and a trailer with hot showers. A cook made our meals and we worked short shifts, with long days off. I was terrible at work. The company threatened to fire me because three weeks in and I still couldn’t plant enough to make minimum wage. You’re a tough lookin’ guy, the foreman said, eyeing my scars, what’s the matter with you? I told him, blurry-eyed, that it’s hard out here in the barren open, with no tree cover or clouds and only myself. My crying unnerved him and he backed off. I wondered if he would call Cherie, tell her about how stupid I was being. Did he know how to call her? If I could just speak with her I’d be okay. Can I please speak with her? This is where we are when Cherie disappears: me, on a sandy cutblock outside of Mackenzie, blubbering to a stranger, and her in between contracts, with her same beat-up car, on a solo trip to Kinuseo Falls.
They all fly in or drive up with their spouses and children in efficient family-sized sedans and SUV’s. They pile into the house and stare out the windows at Mother’s frail body in the garden. They’ve come to help organize the search efforts that have already been going on for two months. Trail rented a boat with some of his savings and drove it up and down the river at the base of the falls, to no avail. I had rented a tent trailer and parked it in a campsite within spitting distance of the falls. I climbed the mountains every day, with and without the rescue workers. I’ve come home to shake hands, meet the children who bite me and call me Uncle. Moon twists her many-ringed fingers, anxious to be back in the house, especially now because she is probably the most sane of the lot. Mother holds all of their faces one-by-one, and tells them she’s so happy they’re here. Trail, Moon, Early, Serengeti, Orland, Mars back in the house their father built. They love their father, miss his wisdom and wit. Around the fire, Rain is dancing naked while clean children chase Community children in circles, squealing. I am sitting up in the tree, away from the fire’s light, surveying their faces and the ugly tales that come out. They share stories of the times they should’ve died, but didn’t. The time Mars fell out of a cottonwood and on to his back. He couldn’t feel his whole legs for a day. And the time Serengeti ate goat shit and almost died. Wasn’t that funny, in retrospect? In the fire’s light, their shadowed cheeks look cavernous. Old. They laugh in cackles. Yes, they say, in retrospect, after having their own children, their parents’ fervor and the havoc it wreaked on their young lives was not really all that bad. They have forgiven us for the distance they themselves imposed. They kiss the forgiveness right into Mother’s smooth and bulbous knuckles and she says, Oh, oh! Trail and Moon and Early and Serengeti and Orland and Mars kiss Mother’s hands and tell her to go see a doctor about the shaking.
Parkinson’s, they say. Of course babies, she says, of course. They surround her. It’s time to be realistic and stop looking, they say. That’s why they’re really here. A tourist saw Cherie lean over the safety guard of the falls with her camera. There’s a picture of her. She looked gaunt, her shaved head, suicidal. Didn’t she love angry music? Hadn’t they always known she was on the edge, since Trent? Maybe she had a heart thing like Father, and fell. Wherever she is, she’s not in pain, nothing troubles her anymore. Oh, oh, says Mother. I scoff at them. They are insane. My spot in the tree is the only true perspective in this place, though I’m heavier now than the last time I was here, and the branches can barely hold my weight. The leaves shake along with my head. The others and their spouses could not be more wrong. They’re conclusions are not based on actual evidence, only assumptions. Confirmation bias. None of them know Cherie like me; they’re not made of what we’re made of. Our parents are not their parents. Cherie loves me enough to make me feel it and I still do. If she were dead, trapped under the gush of some cascading river, I and I alone would know. People leave all the time—they left, father left—it was just Cherie’s turn, let her have her turn. She’s gone, yes, but my sister is alive and well, smoking cigarettes in her car, refusing to look back in my direction, furious and embarrassed by the dramatic way I let tears fall off my jaw and down to the ground. Like a goddamn pussy, she says.
I’m not sure if I’m seeing what I’m seeing, if I want to be seeing at all. What I think I’m seeing is Dan, in the bathroom, putting on lipstick. Bombshell Red. M.A.C. A re-gift from my mother last Valentine’s Day. It came with a note that said, *I love you sweetheart! XXX*. Of course she didn’t know what that meant, and how could she? She’s a grown woman who insists she be called Trishy, instead of Pat, Patty, Patricia. To Trishy’s dismay, I’ve never worn it. I don’t like lipstick. It too boldly advertises that you’re trying, and let’s face it; there might be no greater sin on earth. But then Dan is here, pushing new color into the steep twin peaks of his upper lip, and if I am still looking, and I think that I am, I can see that it’s possible the opposite is true. That this is not effort, but the absence of it. You might even call it grace.

Something to do with his wrist, I think. There aren’t many men out there that I can say have attractive wrists. Dan’s are relatively hairless, thin and fluid. Delicate pivots that allow his hands to whip around while he talks with a kind of flippancy that most find annoying. I don’t, I want to touch them constantly. Hold them. Pull him around by them like the shiny ribbons they tie to helium-filled balloons.

I’m not spying, that’s not what this is about. I had to leave early this morning to meet the summer student, Cody, and drive out to the field. I’m going to show him how to do basic survey plots on a particularly beetle-ravaged stand of Lodgepole pine. I’m going to tell him again about Forêt, how we’re not just the smallest, most economically irrelevant name in timber sales up here, in all of Northern BC, but the whole speech about
community endowments and how our insignificance means we actually care. See, Cody?
Now this right here is a quality tree, and we’re doing our darndest to keep it that way.

It’s just that we’ve recently changed everything over. We aren’t investing in Garmin GPSs anymore because of the summer students. They never completely figure out all of the functions over the four months they’re with us and usually just end up losing them anyway. We’re not big enough to swallow those kinds of losses. Instead, and starting this year, we asked them to come prepared with an iPhone and the apps pre-downloaded. Avenza PDF Maps. Google Earth. And DropBox. Perfect. You’re hired.

But for the life of me, I can’t seem to keep this change in mind. Each morning I get up and pack all of my field equipment, put my boots on and walk out the door. And each morning, at various points in my itinerary, I realize the stupid thing’s missing. Today I was almost all the way to the Tim Hortons on 15th and Ospika, where Cody and I were set to meet, when I realized it was still at home, innocently charging on the nightstand. Now I’m here, at home, and it’s in my hand, the iPhone, leaving. But the bathroom door is open just enough as to seem intentional. Is it intentional? Am I still looking?

Yes. Here I am, still, the frame of the door creating an indented strip down the midline of my face, and there is Dan, completely naked, balancing himself with one hand on the counter top. His face—wet, freshly shaven—inches from the mirror. He smacks his lips together in a practiced way and pouts. His mouth looks twice its normal size, still growing even, en route to engulf his head or mine. He is everyone’s favorite seductress. Bombshell Red. Cinematic and cool.
I can do nothing now but push my left hand against the wall to maintain my position. I am aware of the way my chest moves when I breathe. I am aware of what it feels like to be inside my chest, breathing. Then in the mirror, his eyes meet mine, and it’s like that moment you turn a corner in your car and realize your iPhone is missing, that you can’t remember getting to this point. The large, excitable man that taught the Road Safety clinic we all attended in the fall said it’s a kind of hypnosis. A micro-sleep, he called it. You turn the wheel and then, bang!—you snap out. Well, that’s how it is when Dan looks at me with his soft, red mouth. Like a metal tape measure, accidentally unhitched, sucked back into its center. Or the kick of the gun against your shoulder—are you ever not small? Ever prepared?—and the sudden swell of bruise.

*

I’m in the Tim Hortons up the highway, northwest of town, sitting across from Dan and it’s there again, his grace, although duller because it’s noon and Monday and this is the shitty Tims with the bad lights—the one whose owner doesn’t even live here. I unwrap my bagel and see they’ve given me one with almost no poppy seeds on it. Outrageous, but whatever.

Dan starts lifting his tea bag up and down by his delicate pivot to evenly disperse it and I continue to scowl at the bagel because that action is much better than the alternative. Eventually I give up and look at his face, begin mentally scrolling through lip colors like paint swatches to see which would go best with his beard should he grow it
again—will he grow it again?—then which would look best in the winter when he’s lost his tan, when he’s wearing a suit, when I’ve kissed it into a smudge.

He sips his tea and pulls away sharply, sucking at his bottom lip. I can’t help myself, and interrupt.

I totally forgot to tell you, I say, but Cody and I found something on the block the other day.

Oh? What’s that?

It was so weird. Just right in the ditch as soon as we hit the first Y in the road on cutblock 250-16. Cody saw it first, sticking up out of the mud. Seriously, I don’t even know how he caught it.

Dan nods along, so perfectly timed to what I’m saying I get goose bumps and rub at my naked arms. Mhmmm, he goes, like he gets it, but he doesn’t. He’s an accountant. He hasn’t seen what I’m talking about, almost nobody in the world has. Clear-cut forests aren’t exactly tourist attractions. Low traffic, heavy impact. We avoid doing it in visually sensitive areas. So we push further out. 80 kilometers. 200 kilometers. A short helicopter ride. Two days on a barge. Dan nods along. I could be talking about any Y in any mud-slicked road or the procedure for churning butter for all he cares.

Right, I go on, so it’s a blue blanket, just sticking up out of the mud, just the corner of it. And I’d stopped the truck to get out and check the access because it’s greasy out there, anyway, blah, blah, blah, I know. So Cody jumps out too and heads straight for the ditch and it’s not just a blanket. Like it is, it’s a blanket, but it’s got tons of holes in it, like it’s been stabbed with a knife or something.

That’s it, he says, a blanket with holes?
Well, no.

No? What then? Spit it out.

He blows on his tea and looks up at me over his cup, straight in my eyes. It’s as if I’ve never seen them before. Or they’ve changed. Maybe they’re a different colour. Or shape. I don’t know. And now I can’t bring myself to tell him the rest. It’s his face in the mirror all over again. Who knows what might come out of his mouth.

It was just weird, I say.

Yeah, weird, he says, hmm.

* 

Hmm. Hmm.

It’s the refrigerator turning on and off loudly during the night. I think, It’s broken. I think, Better go check the meats. Dan and his dad shot a bear together last week with a specialty buckshot that blasted through most of its head, rendering it useless—taxidermically speaking. Still, they managed to make sausages out of it, some of which will rot if I don’t do something about the fridge.

I walk down the stairs and can hear the creak of my steps through the denseness of the carpet, as if I am as heavy as I have been feeling lately. I’m slower, it’s been difficult to move with any kind of precision, especially in front of Dan. The light over the oven is on like far away headlights.

Hmm. Hmm.
It’s Dan, I see. Standing in half dark and half oven light on the phone in his large red housecoat. I move back up the stairs four steps because I intend to respect his privacy. The problem, however, is that intentions are as fixed as hummingbirds, and also our house is big and at night it’s a black hole that collapses into itself through mysterious points. Hmmm, hmmm, he is going, on and off like a broken refrigerator. He is soft looking, hazy, plush. I cross my legs, squeeze them together tightly, put my hands on the banister and then push my forehead into it and against the faraway light to keep from getting sucked in.

*

Cody shoots a grouse on the side of the Bobtail Forestry Service Road at 68 kilometer with his 22. It takes him seven tries. He misses six times in a row in every possible way before he gets it right through the eye. Each time the bird puffs itself out in the chest, but never moves, never even cocks its head in our direction. When he holds it up toward me, its body swinging forward then away, forward then away, and Cody’s smile as the frame, stretching wider than I think even his face can manage, it occurs to me that there might be something brave about being so steadfastly stupid.

*

Dan never used to be this quiet. Not that he’s quiet, just quiet more, and for longer, I think. He lies in bed reading his book, and what? I pretend to read mine. Our
elbows are almost touching. Years ago, when we first started dating, we’d wrestle before sex, hold each other down. If he got the best of me he’d pin my wrists to the floor or the bed or whatever and lean forward with his tongue out like he was going to lick my forehead. Only he’d never actually do it, just hold his tongue a millimeter from my skin, so that it kind of ached with the proximity. An uncanny, sickly, almost feeling. Yes, that’s it, an almost feeling.

I look up and see we’re watching the news now, in bed, though I don’t remember when we turned on the TV. Dan is saying, I think to me: Why isn’t our sexy new Prime Minister doing anything about these pipelines? Guess we’ll have to start figuring out how much Dawn it takes to wash oil off a moose.

I’m a little disoriented and embarrassed about having micro-slept, so I say, somewhat robotically, There was also a pair of shoes.

Dan points the remote at the TV and mutes it. What?

Under the blanket on 250-16. I found a pair of women’s shoes wrapped inside it. I just remembered I forgot to tell you that part.

Really, he says. What kind?

Black ones. Like those ballerina flats or whatever you call them.

Some logger ditching evidence of his secret life, you think?

I don’t know, I say. Could be. I scan his eyes, and they’re just as I’ve always remembered them. My neck feels hot. I want Dan to reach over and lay his palm on it, but his hands are like bricks laid tight to his sides.

He smiles and furrows his brows at me. Well, okay then, he says, and unmutes the TV.
Another Monday back under the dim lunch hour light of the Tim Hortons up the highway. Dan has his head resting on his left hand and his watch, its silver and his dad’s, I don’t know the brand, has slipped down along with the sleeve of his Nike pullover that he always wears when he’s planning on running later and voila: again, the wrist— grace—exposed.

I bite into the bagel, which is somehow more bald than last time and toasted to the consistency of cardboard. I allow myself to be visibly disappointed by it. I want the teenaged girl behind the counter to see the lines in my forehead, know that I’m having a terrible time, and feel penitent because it’s all her damn fault.

Dan adds sugar to his tea and stirs. He wants to change the subject from the argument I had with Trishy about whether or not it was Ben Affleck in that movie *The Town*, or Kay-van Schmacey, a person and name she invented, although probably derived from actor Kevin Spacey—also not in *The Town*. Dan taps the metal spoon he asked them for on the side of the cup exactly three times, the final bell, and asks over the tail end of my waning recap what I’m going to do about the shoes.

I don’t know, what do you think? Should I report it? It’s creepy, right?

He slides his head down his forearm and rubs the back of his neck. Unadorned, his lips are the color of worms. They wriggle until words come out.

Well, yeah, but is it really so unusual?
A man in a plaid work coat and torn jeans bumps into our table in his haste to ruin the bathroom—Bang!—knocking Dan’s head against his wrist—bang. Dan scowls. He says, wincing, People dump all kinds of stuff out there.

Sure, I say. But women’s shoes? I stare at his mouth. He doesn’t look up.

Hmm. Where is it again?

That’s the thing. Right off Highway 16. Closer to Vanderhoof.

Whoa.

I know, right?

We’ve rather methodically stumbled into a well-used topic of conversation for us: Highway 16 West – The Highway of Tears. Officially, eighteen missing and murdered women abducted off of that highway. Mostly hitchhikers and young. Mostly First Nations. Every article he reads about it, Dan links to my Facebook page. We leap off of each other constantly, springing up from the surface of our conversation like a double-bounce on a trampoline. Really the number is in the forties, we say. The government doesn’t care about First Nations people, we say. Sexual violence! Racism! An epidemic! An outrage!

You should report it, he says, looking at me.

Should I?

The iPhone starts buzzing on the table—Trishy.

*Ignore.*
Just call me Balls, Cody says in the Tim Hortons on Massey. I say, what? I say, absolutely not. I do not buy his coffee. I avoid his long, narrow torso, his rope-ish arms. I laugh openly at his matted afro and freckles. He looks like a bobble head. He looks like he’s trying to never shave. I think about punching the smile that covers most of his face, brightly pricked by the small gaps between all of his teeth because it is fucking 6 a.m. Carefree, the head bobbles, revealing hints of red in the thin curls of its would-be beard. During a break in my aggravation, I wonder what his heritage is, where his parents are from.

Want to know why? He says.

No, I say.

He shows me a picture of himself dressed as some kind of starlet for Halloween. In a Bombshell Red dress, with sequins.

Everyone could see ‘em, he says. He raises his eyebrows suggestively: Everyone.

I write in the margins of my end-of-the-day-report on his student work record in pencil: Inappropriate, and weird, and whose hire is this?

XXX

*

A Wednesday now and it’s been silent between us for close to fifteen minutes. Dan had asked me what I was doing last night when I was on the computer. Nothing, I
said. Absolutely nothing. Hmm, he said. And then quiet. I was telling the truth. I had opened up Google, gone to Images, and then… I don’t know. I forgot or something. I just stared at the screen. The silence highlights how cold it is in here. I shiver. I rub my arms some more and scowl again at the latest in what’s become a long line of bullshit bagels. Dan too, looks sour, but the lines on my face are deeper now, deeper than his. I think, I scowl better. This is the scowl of a pro. I look around at all of the poorly cleaned tables and sigh twice; once for me and once for the sound. Overly performative given that there are hardly any people in here. Of course there aren’t though, this is the shitty Tims, but still, I can be pissed about it can’t I? Can’t I? And what would Dan look like in a hot pink gloss? What would it feel like to have that gloss stick to the inside of my thigh?

What if I say enough’s enough and return the bagel? What if I march right up there and rub the crispy blandness in that little girl’s face? I was struck by lightning once while riding an ATV on the block in a storm. Bang. BANG BANG BANG. The punch of it threw me off the machine and I thought, Oh poo. At home I told Dan about it and he said, no, it was static, I just got shocked, but residual electrical trauma made it so I couldn’t feel my right arm for a week or remember where we keep the vegetable peeler in the kitchen. Some bolt of it also started a forest fire that swallowed an entire town in three days. I want the girl and the curl at the end of her ponytail to feel something close to that. Oh poo, and then a helpless kind of nothing that burns.

Do you want me to call Craig? Dan asks.

What? I say.

About the shoes.

Craig works in narcotics.
So?

A woman bursts in through the doors with such force that I jump a little. She’s morbidly obese with small round glasses and a thin mullet she’s classed up with a single, tightly combed French braid. She bats roughly at the sweat lining her temples with a brown napkin, and every motion she makes reverberates through the lumps of her as she stomps toward the counter.

I’m not accusing anyone of anything here, she yells at the girl, who is already scared of the world and so trembles, which stirs in me a strange mix of outrage, responsibility, and satisfaction. This is the third time, the woman says, the third time that I have got a cup from this location and only to find that the rim has already been rolled up. Now I’m not saying that there’s a scam going on here, but I’ll tell you what, I’ve had it!

The still shaking girl says something about going to get her manager but the woman has too much momentum. I suddenly feel wild, or just really from this place and time. Something needs to be done, says the woman. The third time. In a row.

I look down at my own cup, a large double-double; two cream, two sugar, and find the arrow that points to the Roll-Up-the-Rim™ contest. I peel up the cardboard lip and imagine the girl sitting in the back on her lunch break with the tie of her sad, beige uniform undone, doing the same to cup after cup, manically searching for that free coffee or donut, or black Nissan X Terra. I can’t even muster imaginary disapproval because hey, I get it, I do.

Sorry, says the underside of the rim. Please play again. I look at Dan and see how tired he is. I look at the girl and wonder if she’s won anything yet.
I am having sex with Cody in the back of my work truck on a deactivated logging road outside of Fort St. James because even inevitability can, at times, be reckless.

His eyes are closed and he bucks around strategically, pretending to care whether or not I’m enjoying it, which doesn’t matter because he’s definitely enjoying himself. I stare at his tightly shut eyelids, their tiny black freckles, and tell him to go ahead and come inside of me. I tell him his cock is the biggest I’ve ever had. This has nothing to do with Dan, I say. I say, this is me, just me. Cody finishes, then rolls over and says, whooooo. Just like that, whooooo. Next time, I say, if I asked you to wear something, would you do it? He raises his eyebrows, then his face melts into a big, dumb, gapped grin.

Like what?

I don’t know.

Like a surprise then? He asks. I shrug. Wacky, he says. Then: Okay. Totally.

On the drive home to Fort Albert, through a series of strategically designed questions, I get Cody to tell me about his parents. His mother’s family is from Grenada, and his father is a Scottish immigrant. Oh, I say, that’s a unique combination. For a moment, his brow furrows, then he says, yeah. It’s super Canadian. We don’t talk for a few minutes after that, but then Cody spots the Vanderhoof Co-Op and gets me to pull in. When he hops back in the truck, he asks me to try this powdered protein supplement he says will replenish the calories we burned during sex. He’s 20 and cares a lot about his
abs. It’s called Mega Mass Pump. It has a ludicrous list of projected results on the side of the tub. *University tested! Will increase your bench press by 1000%! Will increase your calf raises by 3500%!* 

So what do you bench right now?

Like, 150.

So now you bench 1500 pounds?

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA, no. But sometimes when I’m out there and I drink it, I hope a cougar will come out of the tree line so I can fight it!

Yeah?

Yeah!

I drink the whole bottle he shakes up for me and feel like a bomb.

*

I drop Cody off at his car in the parking lot of the Victoria Street Tim Hortons. He leans in through my driver’s window and for the first time ever, kisses me goodnight.

Only now do I finally feel guilt, and am surprised by the lightness of it. Everyone always describes it as heavy, dour, but really, it’s a spark, like the ones that shoot out at you when you hook up the cables to boost a truck, or get struck by lightning while riding a quad. Evidence that there is, in fact, something happening here. Want me to grab you a coffee on my way home? Look, I got those oranges you like from the store. Whatever you want Dan, I’ll do it. I came to this Tims, didn’t I?
This garbage Tim’s is closest to Dan’s work, and none are close to my work, so we’re back. Dan is texting someone. I am thinking about painting his mouth a coral matte with my fingers until he bites them and get mildly turned on in a frustrated way. Like when you try to load a map to your phone with one bar of service so it takes forever but look it’s finally there right at the end like one second away okay one more second okay one more than that okay 99% 99% 99% and you clench your thighs until you feel it in your crotch. Meanwhile, behind his head, the woman with the rim problem has returned, this time with evidence and twice her original fervor. She shakes an empty cup in the cashier’s face, breathless, trembling. I admit that now, after multiple days of this, even I am afraid. I clench up.

I’m going to call Craig for you, Dan says. Actually—

Actually.

Actually, I’m going to see him tonight. We’re going for a run.

Actually.

This is the FOURTH time. In. A. Row.

*

I am at the back of 250-16, crouched behind a log deck, at the base of a mountain, on top of a hill. I needed to come back here and re-track a line that Cody forgot to save. I
pull at my hair, my scalp is itchy from mosquito bites. Cody and I got in a fight, I don’t think we’ll be sleeping together anymore. He had met me at a block right beside this one, and it reminded me of the shoes. I brought them up. When he got into my truck, I asked him if I should call them in.

Dude, I did that weeks ago, he said.

What? Really?

Um, yeah?

Why?

He leaned away from me, leaned back against the passenger window. The bag he brought shifted in his lap, and I could see the glint of sequins. Red. Bombshell.

Because there’s like, a ton of fucking missing women up here, he said.

I know, I said. Mostly native. It’s terrible.

I couldn’t think. I wasn’t thinking straight. I reached for the bag, and he pulled it away. I tried to touch his face.

What is wrong with you? he said, and looked at me like I was the rare and confounding thing.

I sighed, tried to get him to make eye-contact. I’m not expressing myself properly right now, I said. I’m trying to say that I get it. Like, it’s important. And I’m an idiot for not calling it in. I think about that all the time. Really, I do.

He opened the door with such force it bounced back and hit him in the knee. The dress fell out of the bag and into the mud of the road. He picked it up, threw it into the ditch.

Oh, well in that case, he said. Fucking white people.
The tree line cracks and echoes along the curve of the ridge. A wall of pine, dense and scarred in layers and destined to fall and crush me, I’m sure of it. I forgot the phone again. My Garmin is old and blinking and acting up. I hit it on my thigh to reset the screen, shake my head as if thoughts could be whipped out of my ears, then follow the line to the next and final point on the track. Save. The wind picks up. I run down the hill as fast as I can. Near the road, a stick catches the tip of my boot and I fall, palms first, lurching into the ditch, into a blue blanket, my fingers catching in its holes.

Suddenly, the sound of rain.

Not rain.

I have tumbled back to the beginning, to the ditch, to the blanket and the shoes, only the shoes are gone. I can’t see them. They’re not here anymore. My fingers are stuck in the blanket’s holes, I can’t untangle them. I am writhing, screaming. Since I was here last, the blanket has been infiltrated by ground-nesting wasps. They swirl up and out of the earth in a geyser and hurl their tiny bodies at my chest like soft bullets, like hard rain. And I can’t even muster imaginary disapproval because hey, I get it, I do.

* 

Think about it, Dan says on a Sunday, in his Sunday sweats, rapping his knuckles on the table. Think about all those shows we watch. How they always say somebody
somewhere knows something. What if you’re that somebody, and you never say anything?

I say nothing and nod and pick the paper wrapper of my bagel for any lingering poppy seeds. This time, the manager has come out of the back to try and resolve the situation with the woman, who has returned once more with pre-rolled rims. The manager has to of course; last night there was a segment about it on the local news. Rim-Gate, they called it.

The manager is a small Filipino woman with her hair in a high bun wrapped in a brown net. She pushes her hands out in front of her and keeps moving them up and down in the same way people do when they’re trying to hush a crowd or a spooked horse. She says Ma’am, Ma’am, and Calm down, to the woman, who in turn does the opposite. The woman accuses her of covering for one of the girls in beige. The manager accuses the woman of rolling up the rims. The woman mocks the manager’s accent. Throws a balled up napkin at her tie. I feel a version of déjà vu that’s more like a kind of understanding as I watch the scene from my usual seat. I feel like it’s not just this woman, but also me, this small city, and the entire North. I feel that if I ever encounter a cougar, I will fight it and die.

Dan twists his neck around to stare openly at the explosion of Rim-Gate, just as my phone begins to buzz. It’s Trishy again, and I swat at the screen until she’s quiet. I don’t want to talk about whatever inane thing she wants to talk about. I look right at Dan in his new eyes until I’m sure he sees that I can’t stand that he’s not wearing the lipstick; that he puts it on just to wipe it off.
People are crazy, he says, shaking his head. The large woman swings slow
punches over the counter. Someone should call the cops.

Yeah, I say.

I have to go though, he says. I have to go in to the office today.

Okay, me too.

And then for a run with Craig.

Okay.

Bye.

Bye.

He kisses me on the cheek.

Hello? says Trishy from the edge of the table, sounding farther away than she is.

Hello? Are you there?

Ignore.

*

I’m a thirty-three year old Registered Professional Forester living with my thirty-
two year old accountant boyfriend of ten years in a five-bedroom house in the new
development up University Hill. He urges me, when he gets home, sweaty and ecstatic
from his run, to call Craig. Craig will do something about the shoes. I tell him I will. He
coughs a lot in the shower. Stretches on the bed while I read. Eventually, he removes my
hand from his soft penis and goes down on me with his naked mouth for twenty-five
minutes. We watch a true crime show about Mormon husbands who murder their wives
on the flat screen mounted on the yellow wall in our bedroom. Then a news report about a protest for missing and murdered Indigenous women. We praise the protestors. Then go back to talking about the morose, the insane and the absurd. Our perpetual surprise. We talk about never painting our walls again. Then he falls asleep first, and for five whole minutes I am alone beside him, blinking and breathing slower and slower, forgetting everything that has happened before now.
Who Is, Who Was, and Who Is to Come

Open the book, and there he is.

Grandpa. Sitting at his dining room table, surrounded by cups with varying amounts of water left in them, as if he were about to chime them with a spoon, play a bedtime song. Along with the cups, he has in front of him several composition notebooks with torn pages, and in his hand: an embossed pen. The skin along his thin hairline is flakey, so he scratches. His mouth is dry, so he swallows. Through the French doors that face the green and faded patio, the valley’s drop, the endless velvety wilderness, comes the mid-morning sun. Grandpa squints against it. His pale face ripples. The brightness and speed of the bloated clouds make it feel to him as if the house were actually a boat, gliding. The long-armed cottonwood in the yard swims alongside, a front crawl like an Olympian. He presses his lips into a concentrated grimace. Grandpa thinks he used to like boats. Sailboats mostly, but motorized ones too. He once sipped cocktails on one that was 3 feet short of a yacht with other coolly dressed men. Friends. Their high, freckled cheeks and straight teeth, their loose hair blowing every which way but down. The ocean all around them, glimmering.

If Grandpa focuses—gets the paper weighted with some hefty books, old picture dictionaries and the like, leans his weight on his elbow—he can hold the tremor down enough for the writing to come out. And when it comes does it ever. Into the newest, cleanest notebook. With speed like confidence, like intent, like Truth with a capital T. Double spaced. Erratic margins. A faint, crooked, but holy and legible cursive—
DEAR WANDA

JUST GOT A BRAIN WAVE

—He once told someone that the tremor is like an engine, like a Mustang. I got too much horsepower, he said to the person. They might have laughed. They should have; some things are not lost to age, and Grandpa was/is a hilarious man. He pauses his writing, tries to conjure the person’s face, but it’s amorphous, a blur. Heart shaped though, like his. Young. A relative he figures. He gives up, goes back to scrawling. He’s been forgetting so much lately, like he’s being hollowed out. Less a man now than a vessel for the Lord, Who’s in Grandpa’s head again, loud as ever. His hands like leathery star maps, curl tighter around the pen. Its embossment reads: Bart the Fart. A twenty-some-odd year joke at the dealership. Grandpa likes jokes. Enjoys a playful kind of British humour, he thinks, and then forgets again. His tongue pokes up and out of his gummy mouth.

Sometimes if he tries too hard to remember, and can’t, featureless faces twist into a great black hole, and a sound emerges like a coughing moan—scrambled, terrible—like someone trying to siphon oil out of a hollow drum. The Lord, too, is deafening. A kind of thumping, erratic rhythm behind his pink eyes. A tear shakes out of one as he suddenly recalls how a dark-skinned woman, mulatto maybe, a daughter maybe, certainly daughter-aged, stood in front of him once. In a familiar room like a kitchen, or one with a bed. He was seated or she was just taller. Taller, but he won’t admit it. Grown. Thick veins ran the length of her neck, her lips twitched as if they were being jerked by tiny
hooks. What did you say? she said, with not an ounce of openness, of reception. What did he say? He didn’t know. A moan like a scream. Terrible—

REVELATIONS 18:1 FOR I WILL DIE UPON THE ALTAR OF SOULS

(CHRIST’S) AND YOU WILL BE KILLED THE YEAR 2018 BY 6 MILLION ANGELS OF LUCIFER’S ARMY

ALSO: I WILL BE IN TOWN FOR FISH AND CHIPS AT 7:00 PM THIS FRIDAY. YOU SHOULD HAVE NO TROUBLE GETTING THERE IN THE CAR I GAVE YOU. IF YOU COME I WILL FORGIVE YOU THE AFOREMENTIONED WHORING

—None of this is very surprising. Grandpa’s the kind of man who tells a thirteen year old she’ll never go to university because she got her nose pierced. The kind of man who tells it like it is. A man that leans across the red leather front seat of his 1967 black Mustang, on the way to pick up some apples for the pie the girl’s mother’s going to make them for dessert, and says that men like him are the ones that read those scholarship letters, old-fashioned men of conviction, and they don’t like metal piercings mussing up an otherwise good looking girl’s face.

But isn’t he also the kind of man to later, after the pie, sit and help her finish her homework? And after reading it through and telling her how effective her conclusions were, didn’t he flick the paper, didn’t he hold his hand up and give her an A-Okay sign? Wasn’t that a good feeling? Yes, a good feeling. Yes, that kind of man. The kind of man that sits and watches a post-homework John Cleese movie with her. That laughs along with her to all the wonky parts. Playful and British. The kind that leaned across the
paisley couch and pointed out to the thirteen year old girl the timeless beauty of Jamie Lee Curtis’s un-pierced face. *Which means he was the same kind of man all along, I guess—*

*REV. 26:10 BLOOD ETC.*

—It’s not like he’s so wrapped up in the remembering. He has other concerns, other interests. He closes the blinds using a hook he devised from a cane and some chicken wire—acquired from a shed two doors down. Grandpa has been gathering treasures from his neighbours’ trash bins, garages, and backyards for some time now. So far, no one’s been any the wiser. Save for that black girl-woman who keeps coming by. She mentions the items from time to time, points at them, shakes her giant, blurry head, takes them out of the house. Usually Grandpa is able to find the items again in his own bin out front. Or in the dumpster behind the convenience store down the highway where she usually drops them on her way home or to work.

The collecting is a matter of space. The house is too big by far, with its three-car garage and cedar staircase. He got it for next to nothing when he first moved up north from Vancouver to this mid-sized industrial town, known for its giant, converging rivers, for its small, green university, for its pulp and paper. Fort Albert, it’s called. Though nobody is entirely certain who Albert was, except for Grandpa, just not anymore. A prince, he’d be willing to bet.

The house is up the highway’s steep hill, a fifteen minute drive North out of the city’s center. It was built in the 70’s in what they call Coastal Style. Long, flat-shingled roofs with large skylights and angled hard to the ground, so that snow or rain might easily slide down and off the sides. In the winter the sound of the snow slips and piles around
the house like a wall, makes a rolling sound like thunder. Grandpa used to find it calming, and then eerie, and lately: intrusive. Thank the Lord for summer, though it brings the equally aggressive trees and light. The remains of a chandelier in the front foyer scatter brightness, there for God knows what reason in the first place. Silly, gaudy, a woman’s touch to be sure. Not his choice, to be sure. Grandpa thrashed it a time ago with a chair until the chandelier was half its original girth. He cut his feet up on all the shards in the carpet and they took months to heal right, which had brought him satisfaction. Broken glass, bloody feet. There’s order in consequence, he’s always said.

He skittered to and from on the soaked and then crusted bandages. He always gave the stairs a wide birth. They had grown too much for his heart, so he stopped attempting them altogether, and then the dark rooms at the top where he had once slept, and others too, likely, had started behaving ugly.

Thinking, thinking, he scratches away in a newer notebook, and then there’s that woman-girl’s face shape again, her filthy hands on his feet, checking the bandages. Guiding him toward the foot of the stairs, as if she couldn’t feel what he felt about the rooms at the top. Or, more likely, she could but didn’t care. Help, he had cried out. She held him by the shoulders like she was grown. Her nails were long and painted coquettishly. On purpose, of course. She knew better. Don’t you want to go up and watch a movie? She had said. Let’s go watch a movie. He stumbled, fell down to the floor on his knees. Help. Help. She turned to face him, bent down, Oh Grandpa, was the last coherent thing he heard her say before those grotesque sounds belched up and out of her. Louder and louder they came, making him tear at the thin strands of his hair, until
eventually he was able to gather himself, was able to muster enough balance to level his fist at her open, foreign mouth—

*REV. 1:2 JUDGMENT ETC.*

*WANDA. THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT. I HAVE LIVED A LONG LIFE. I HAVE MANY STORIES AND WISDOM TO SHARE. DON’T THINK I DON’T KNOW WHO YOU’VE BEEN OUT GALAVANTING WITH AT NIGHT. DON’T THINK I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE HIDING*

—This same bright day, in the even brighter afternoon, police arrive with their tight fitting slacks and hilarious little handguns and city order to forcibly remove the garbage from Grandpa’s home. There have been complaints from the neighbours about the smell, they say, for weeks now. Something dead in there, they suspect. Putrefaction.

The police do not alert Grandpa’s family at this point—*in truth, there is only me, but still, seems like they should have.* Instead, one of the officers sits the shaking Grandpa near the foot of his stairs, while the other pushes past with a handful of city workers through the foyer, past the newspapers and books stacked like hoodoos, into the garage, breaking open the padlock as they do. There, they find the pile. Grandpa’s mountainous heap of stolen, rotting food, nestled between the river boat and the ATVs. One of the cops throws up. Grandpa laughs and laughs, thinking, *What a farce.*

He doesn’t remember this now, though his daughter does and will never forget it, but once Grandpa bought the house next door because an East Indian couple had put in a bid on it. She was horrified, the daughter said recently, because the wife was her Grade 8
math teacher, whom she loved. Grandpa’s major reasoning for the purchase was that those people smelled—

*THE DIFFERENCE IN OUR AGES IS ONLY A PROBLEM OF THE MIND*

*DEAR (REV. 4:10). WHERE ARE YOU? (REV. 19:93-101) WHEN CAN I EXPECT YOU THEN? (REV. 1:1) I THINK YOU ARE NOT CONSIDERING THAT I WILL FAIRLY COMPENSATE YOU FORTY DOLLARS PER WEEK TO DO MY WASHING AND MORE*

—in the holding room at the new police station downtown, the one with all the sky lighting and wooden beams, just a five minute walk from the Pinewood strip mall and Scotiabank, Grandpa sits in the dimmest corner, his spine straightened firmly against the back of the chair. His hands rest warmly in the white strip of light that lays across his lap. Occasionally a redheaded social worker comes by, refills his Styrofoam cup with cool water. She’s the flirty type, he thinks, tells her she’s got a smile brighter than the sun. She laughs and squeezes his wrist like all the girls do. All the girls in all those cities across the country. After the car shows at the bar. One of them had eyes like a puppy and a gap between her teeth he joked was like a penny slot. How many to get you going? he had said. Gone and got herself in trouble by now. Not that he’s got anything to do with that mess. Any of those messes. When the social worker walks away, Grandpa pours the contents of the cup into a nearby tropical plant.

Loudly, a herd comes tumbling into the holding room. Some wack-job space cadet and a bunch of officers half wrestling, half dragging him. Grandpa can see through the tangle of bodies the red burn of the cuffs against the space cadet’s wrists. The kind of aggravated marks that might scar. One of the officers trips and the whole lot of them go
crashing to the ground in a pileup. The space cadet’s teeth get smashed up through his bottom lip and he starts wailing and spitting blood everywhere. Grandpa’s body does not react to the scene, no muscle memory. He thinks he might never have been a fighter. Thinks he might have talked his way out of a lot of fights. Pretty quick the boys roll away together like a wave, and there in the wake is that damned empty-faced brown girl. In a sharp blue skirt and blazer, a silver name tag pinned to her chest. Gold pierced through her pig nose. More height on her than ever before.

Hey, says the social worker, Look who’s come to get you. No, says Grandpa, pushing harder into the back of the chair. No. Bart, she says, sexy, sweet, disgusting, Don’t you want to go home with your family? He really loses it at that. Scoffs so hard foamy pieces of spit fly out and onto the ground. Good God, no. He says, No way. Look at her, he says. No goddamn way. He doesn’t look at her. By now her face has opened up carnivorously, the sound getting ready to heave itself out. His eyes follow the blood streaked like a road, like order, past his feet and through a set of double doors. Take me in, Grandpa says, turning to face the social worker, groping at her sleeves. He nods toward the doors. Take me and put me where that space cadet is—

*IT’S THAT BLACK TRASH ISN’T IT WANDA? REV 46:1 THE COWARDLY THE UNBELIEVING THE LIARS THE FILTH THE FILTH THE FILTH. LUCIFER IS NOT KIND. THERE IS NO KINDNESS BUT MINE AND THE LORD’S*

—Not clear whether the following reveals that he remembers sitting side-by-side at the kitchen table with the girl in the evenings, or the afternoons, any chance they got, really, their shoulders hunched and touching, one of those old big dictionaries that was half her height, half her weight, opened to some random page, together and copying down all the
words and their definitions, ooh-ing at the longest, giggling at the twisted and absurd. Crunching on salt and vinegar chips until their tongues burned. But one could probably read it that way—

FOR SO LONG I HAVE LOVED YOU WITH ALL MY MIGHT

—It seems likely that at some point he thinks about Grandma, seeing as guilt resonates throughout his writings. Grandma doesn’t visit him, but doesn’t talk about him unkindly either. Once, at a family dinner, she bent over his shoulder and cut up his roast for him into thin strips, just the way he likes it, which their daughter hated, scolded her mother for later at the bottom of a darkened stairwell. You’re enabling him, she said. We don’t have to do this anymore. Lately, Grandma and her second husband spend much of their time gardening together or going on cruises. Grandpa hated cruise ships. Carnie boats, he called them.

Grandpa arrives home from the police station, slams the car door in that girl-woman’s loud mulatto face and runs inside. The place is gutted and obnoxiously sterile. Everything moved, wiped down with a heavy hand. This is how he thinks of her. Grandma. Or any of the women, really. Not as a person or a face, but as a kind of tone. As a force or pressure against his existence. Like a physical law acting without his permission or sight. Once or twice or many times before he had come home to a gutting. Clothes ripped out of a closet. Discoloured outlines of missing wall hangings. Furniture rearranged for the pillage. A violent reordering. Tectonic shifts. Revelation. Where did these women run off to? What would they ever do without him? And where, where, were all his goddamn things? And for some reason, the girl there, yes, still a girl, still mixed-
race, still there, standing in the doorway between the foyer and the kitchen. Teary.

Singed. Chewing on her fingers like an idiot.

The Lord returns to him in the night, when he’s alone again, knocks him out of his sleep. More urgent. More clear. He gets up from the couch and turns on the lamp beside the table in the kitchen. Sits in his same, worn chair.

Write, says the Lord. Write—

*AUGUST 5TH, 2015*

*I DID NOT ASK FOR THIS BURDEN. THOUGH I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE CLARITY BOTH NOW AND THEN.*

*GOD’S THRONE IS WHITE, WANDA (REV. 4:20). BE SURE TO WRITE THAT DOWN*

—Grandpa is not sure whether or not he was a hunter, but either way a stranger—short, thin, blonde—is screaming and pointing at his gun. He had brought it out for a cleaning, as a mental break from the writing. He would read a book or watch a movie but everything is up the stairs. They make him sick. Like static against the skin, but in the stomach, the heart. No, wait. The TV was moved downstairs one day. Somebody had come and moved it behind his back. Christ, Grandpa thinks. He also thinks that historically, he was not a religious man. This is probably why the writing takes a harder toll on him than it might on others. He’s sure to keep his body purged to help with this, to be a cleaner vessel, fasting, but still, this is a lot, would be a lot for anyone. Perhaps he
went to a parochial school as a child. Or Sunday school at a local church. Who knows.

The blonde is still screaming. Christ, he screams back, Christ!

He’s not remembering things right. He had not taken a break from writing, he wouldn’t do that. He had, for the first time, acted with the Lord’s hand beyond the page. Had, just moments before, crept along the back fence he and the neighbours shared, had ducked and stepped quietly up the hill of their yard. He did used to be a hunter. A nice change from selling cars. He used to sell cars, you see. He was so good at it. Grandpa’s the kind of man that can wink at you without making your skin crawl. He’s got a smile that comes out toothy and a little sideways, eyes that disappear when he does. Many people, who he does not remember, have described this smile as playful. Infectious. The kind of man that takes up a whole room. So much so that when he makes a quip that’s off-colour, that cuts, that hurts, even then they all find it in themselves to smile.

When that ethnic daughter-faced girl-woman was small, she’d sometimes be out on those hunting trips too. The blonde woman standing in front of him is not her. She is the neighbor, and this is not his house. This is not his gun. In the moonlight she looks like a siren, white-skinned and swaying. Once, the girl looked straight into his camera, holding up the head of her first moose, a toothless smile. Don’t slouch, he said. She straightened up. He smiled. Say Cheese, he said. It was daylight then, no moon. Like that other time when he sat with her at the table, staring at the dictionary’s final page. Zyxt.

Kentish dialect. Past tense of zi: “Seen.” I always wished I’d gotten into the Newspaper business, he said. I was too smart to be selling cars. And I’ve got a lot to say, you know? Should’ve been a writer, a news man. He poked his finger down at the oversized letter Z. Don’t you dare get stuck doing something you’re too smart to do, he said. The girl
promised. She always promised. Good, he said, then looking down at her chest. For Christ’s sake, please button up your shirt. The times were much much different then. Or not, I don’t know. I don’t know why I’m pointing any of this out.

At the police station again, for the break-in this time. The girl finally appears, wearing sweatpants and taller still than before. Maybe in this moment Grandpa is sure she is a granddaughter. Likely his, he thinks. She is black, he can’t help but notice, very overweight, but the only thing he knows. He falls sobbing into her arms. They won’t put me away, he cries, won’t take me anywhere I want to go. I know, she says, rubbing and patting his back, I know. He smells her sweatshirt then, her laundry detergent, and thinks of his daughter, her mother. So clearly does he remember his daughter’s face, her freckled cheeks, the sheen of her beer-coloured hair, and the way it all hardened one day. Something out there poisoned her against him. Her mother, his wife, he guessed. Or the boyfriend. Some disappearing African rebel she met in an activist club that plunged his tongue in her mouth until she spat all Grandpa’s words back at him in choked, bitter shrieks, flapping her arms like a Corvid. Called him a racist and a woman-hater. Told her own father who would never leave her, sincerely and often, to go fuck himself.

When the granddaughter-woman’s hand gets close to his face, attempting to dab away the tears, he bites it until she bleeds. This time, she’s very upset—

_AUGUST 10TH, 2015_

_MURDER AND WAR. WHAT I HAVE TAKEN IS WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN_
MEET ME FOR FISH AND CHIPS NEXT FRIDAY THEN. I CANNOT ALWAYS
BE SO FORGIVING. I HAVE A PLAN TO SHARE WITH YOU. THOUGH YOU
HAVE NO FAITH IN ME.

KILL KILL KILL DEATH ETC. YOU KNOW THE DRILL

—I have to stop now. Put the pen down, take a break. This seems dishonest. A mockery,
maybe, in its reconstruction. I should start again.

Okay, yes. Grandpa wasn’t perfect. When I dropped out of my Journalism degree
and got the job at Scotiabank, he had looked at me with general disappointment. As if he
had known that something in me wasn’t meant to make it and that it wasn’t my fault.
Perhaps he blamed himself. I don’t see how he could see it that way. But also know that
he had, up until that point, been nothing but supportive of my writing. Not everyone’s got
a head on their shoulders like you, he said. Not everyone’s whip-sharp like that.

Once, when I was small, he had brought me back a stuffed E.T. from one of his
trips to California to see a car show and a mistress. Elaborate networks of women he had,
though that wasn’t all the way clear until recently, at least not to me. People don’t tell
children these things, or teach them to be unforgiving. And then they are surprised when
suddenly you are older and so fierce is your love that no amount of humiliation can
wedge it out of you. I had not known about the women. Though the women, piled up in
him like knives, had known me. My mother, too. They came out at us in low criticisms.
 Didn’t we think before we acted? Didn’t we know what kind of men are out there? Mum
came home to him young as his last girlfriend, with me, an out-of-wedlock brown baby.
A farce and not the kind he enjoyed. She stayed with him until Grandma left and I was
graduated and so no longer needed his money enough to put up with him. I came home to
him in the evenings though, left my E.T. there for safekeeping. He’d pat me on the head and maybe sing me a song. Remind me to wash my face and keep my bush of hair tidy. And later, in the mornings before work, too, I went to him, poured his glasses of water out. Swept. Dusted. Stuffed the pages back in the books. No one else came. Especially not Mum. She’d hold open her palms to me, tell me he made his bed, let him lie in it. Which is rich, isn’t it? If anyone should be mad, it’s me. And I’m not, that’s not what this is. So I never had a baby, a serious boyfriend, maybe I never will. But once I was a child who nobody explained love to and now it’s too damn late—

LISTEN. IT IS LAUGHABLE FOR YOU TO SUGGEST I HAVE BEEN THOUGHTLESS IN MY ENTERPRISE.

THINGS THAT I ENJOY:

WARM SOCKS

RUM

KNOWING

SO YOU SEE REV. 2:10 DO NOT BE AFRAID OF WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO SUFFER (CHRIST’S CROWN) BE FAITHFUL EVEN TO THE POINT OF DEATH

I ALSO ENJOY WHEN WE RIDE IN THE CAR TOGETHER ON SUNDAY AFTERNOONS. DO NOT FORGET
—At the nursing home downtown where the Ministry made me put him, walking distance from many great amenities said the brochure, including my Scotiabank, I sat in the family visiting area and went through the notebooks, looking for meaning. Don’t, said one of the staff, don’t try to make anything of that. Just the ramblings of a dying mind. Nothing more. She hovered near the pillar adjacent me with a worried expression, chewing gum. What did she know? She wasn’t there when we watched the movie, together. *A Fish Called Wanda.* She had no idea. You look alike, you know, she said, scratching her eyebrow piercing. I said nothing, turned more pages until eventually she left. Decided to buy a Bible and read the Book of Revelations. Uncover his logic. I was going to figure it out.

When I walked into his room, Grandpa shuffled toward me. Got close enough to spit. It hit me in the forehead, and I caught it before it slid down and into my eyes. It should’ve been impossible. The staff said he had not drunk any water in two days. He was dehydrated, they said. Shit-skin, he hissed at me. His gums and eyes were grey. He turned and ran back to the small desk in the corner of the room and his writing. I began unpacking boxes and sorting his things into piles on the floor, the way that I knew he liked them. His Monty Python VHS’s of course. I picked up some added stuff too to occupy space. Plastic bowls and plates and cassette tapes from the thrift store. Some old clothes I needed to get rid of. Various stuffed animals he brought back to me from various trips, E.T. included. And a special treat: a toy rifle still in its box, similar to the one he used to own. The nurse came by again and told me I couldn’t put the stuff on the floor, it’s a safety hazard, she said, her gum smacking loudly. Watch me, I said. These
island women, Grandpa said, pointing at a Filipina nurse walking by, Generally pretty dirty, but they do a good job.

Sitting there, I remembered how once he looked me dead in the eye and asked me to go down to the massage parlor, the one with the foreign girls that he liked. Make him an appointment, etc. Grandpa’s lonely, he said. He’s a lonely, lonely man. What did you say? I had asked, like I couldn’t believe it. I had thought that was the first time he had slipped. But maybe not. It’s difficult now to say what was and wasn’t out of character. I folded more of his clothes into their pile. Added some VHSs to the top to steady it.

Behind me, I could hear Grandpa’s pen tearing through the pages as he traced over his previous writing again and again.

Honestly we are both failures. Failures together. Or, come to think of it, maybe it’s just me. While he found divine inspiration by which to write, a purgatory-like loop of verbal incontinence, I found nothing. I’m ten deep at the bank now, and in return I have chapped hands from scrubbing the filth of money away with antibacterial soap, a gold pin commemorating my years of work behind the counter. I’ve received no such accolades for my essays or reporting. Probably because there is none. There’s hardly even reading, aside from his notebooks. Though I’ve stared until my eyes ached at a form rejection or two. In my university classes they had all shouted loudly over each other. Offered clear thoughts and solutions. I stopped speaking, because I couldn’t stop feeling embarrassed about the sound of my voice. The weak incoherence of it. I tried all the baby steps the internet recommends, but each time I pitched a personal essay to whatever irrelevant online magazine I imagined who might be on the other side of the screen, a real writer, and felt a kind of shrinking all over. I am not who either of us had hoped—
—Grandpa escaped the home during the nurses’ shift change. I ignored the calls because I was sitting in my manager’s office, handing in my two weeks notice. I listened to my mother’s frantic voicemail outside, as I had a smoke to clear my post-quitting nerves before starting work. They called her because I wasn’t picking up. I can’t with him, she cried, I just can’t anymore. It’s been my whole life, this shit. This struck me as odd, pathetic. As if she had ever with him. The smoking is a secret I’d kept from Grandpa for years. Smoking yellows the teeth, he’d always said. You’ve got enough working against you, don’t need to add yellow teeth to the list.

I imagined him ducking behind a laundry cart as it rolled by, like the clever characters of my childhood cartoons, like a Monty Python bit. Or smooth talking the woman at the front desk into issuing him a day pass. I imagined him hitching a ride with a trucker, with whom he would share congenial banter, telling him all about his cars, his former birds. Whoever and wherever they were. With the help of the trucker, he would find his way to the river where he would watch the annual float. The float was held that same day, the sky cloudless and the sun low. But the heat never quite reaches the river like it does everywhere else in town. I had imagined Grandpa at the river, laughing alongside all his new friends, his cheeks high and freckled, cruising the currents with blow-up alligators, with buckets of beer and ice on the boats—

_AUGUST 18_**TH, 2015**
REV. 21:1 THEN I SAW A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH, FOR THE FIRST HEAVEN AND THE FIRST EARTH HAD PASSED AWAY, AND THERE WAS NO LONGER ANY SEA

REMEMBER WANDA. PLEASE.

—When Grandpa said it was an armed robbery, like he was announcing the headline on the cover of the next day’s Citizen, one man standing at the back of the line let slip a laugh. Grandpa pulled the gun up from his side, where apparently it had been hanging from his hand the whole time. He cradled it shakily in the crook of his left forearm, and only when his right hand worked itself around the trigger, did some people shout and duck. The majority, however, stayed standing, frozen, at the mercy of what seemed a confused condescension.

Hey, he hollered, Listen up! He stalked around the entrance, eyes darting like he was looking for something. He did not finish his thought. It was mostly quiet at this point, except for his breathing. He breathed with his mouth open, and I could hear the dryness. His cups. I could only imagine how long it had been. How long had it been? When did he first walk in? He squinted. He scratched his chin. His face contorted, like a shallow pool into which someone had tossed a stone.

After some time he finally saw me. I had not and did not move. Grandpa held our eye contact, walked toward my counter. The woman I’d been helping up until he made his announcement, who was trying to cash a clearly bad cheque, absurdly pulled her sunglasses down over her eyes, scuttled away as she lowered to the ground, like someone
play-acting walking down a flight of stairs. The gun swiveled up and shook at my nose, so close that my vision doubled in an effort to perceive its plastic orange tip.

You, Grandpa said, I’ll kill you, you know?

He pushed the point of the gun into my cheek, the socket of my same-shaped jaw. It jiggled against me, his thin arms struggling to maintain the weight. It’s just a toy, I thought, I can overtake him. But I didn’t. I didn’t want to scare or hurt him. I can see now how that was my mistake. I could see a few police cars and officers through the large tinted windows, gathering along the highway—a safe distance—pointing, like nosey neighbours. The twenty or so scattered people inside the bank—women with shoulder bags half the size of their bodies, men with filthy work boots and camouflage t-shirts speckled with mud and old blood, a boy with spiked hair, a bright polo—wrapped themselves around themselves, their limbs and skin poor excuses for shields. They closed their eyes. Turned their heads toward their own feet, to each other, to the door. I tried to ignore them and focus on Grandpa. Don’t you know me? I said, I’m your granddaughter. He smiled widely, there was foam lining the creases of his mouth. His eyes lingered on my same-shaped chin.

Everyone, he shouted, This is my granddaughter. They did not look, did not uncover their ears. Somewhere, somebody sneezed. She is so smart, he beamed. Smartest kid in her class. Recognition, I thought. Lucidity. He squeezed my hand with uncommon strength, pulling me toward him so that my stomach folded painfully over the counter, while the gun, that stupid toy, jutting up like a spear between us, forced my back to arch, my face and head to angle away, strained. She gets that from me, you know? He scanned all of their taught faces for confirmation, but they did not oblige.
Through a reflection in the tinted windows, I saw the globular shape of an RCMP officer open the front door. Knock, knock, he said sweetly. Grandpa didn’t seem to notice or care. He turned back to me, his breathing suddenly laboured. He said: button your shirt up, girl. You’re in public. And so he was dangerous again, though one could argue he had been the whole time. I had no response but to shake and sweat and suddenly sob. Not fear of death or harm, obviously, but equally desperate: heartbreak. The kind that’s noisy, that panics the lungs. Please consider for a moment: It was hard not to take this part personally. My chest had never felt so small. My throat stung.

You might think I had choices then, but I didn’t. Out of necessity, I squeezed Grandpa’s hand back, so that our same-lined palms flattened against each other. I’ve since tried to imagine what he was thinking when I did, but can’t. He was only staring, his cheeks and brows sinking in my peripheral vision. No, I can’t tell you what I looked like to him anymore, I can no longer see myself through his eyes. I thought I was the Wanda—aren’t I the Wanda? What I can tell you is that with that toy rifle, my stupid gift, grinding against my cheek against my teeth, I wriggled my fingers in between his so that we were locked together, because hope at these points is inevitable, and we never want to be destroyed.

The officer began to slowly walk forward. Started speaking more assuredly. Soothing at first, then stern, then frantic. Everyone turned their heads except Grandpa.

What did you say? he said, trying to recoil from me, wedging my jaw open with the gun. 

What did I say? I don’t know.
The officer reached forward to grab Grandpa’s wrist. Grandpa swung the gun back, trying to hit him with it. The tip dragged up my cheek, scraping some skin away. The officer seemed to be trying a move, trying to lower them both to the ground, but Grandpa’s wild swinging made them lose balance. Their faces disappeared into each other’s shoulders. As if they were long lost family, hugging. Why didn’t I say right away it was a toy?

There was a moan like a scream. Terrible.

*

The officer’s awkward tackle broke his neck, did what Grandpa’s frail body could not do for itself. His ashes sit alone on the mantle above the living room fireplace in a Pewter urn I got with a package deal from the funeral home. I stare at the urn most nights until I fall asleep on the couch.

The house and its many abandoned rooms are mine now. When I first moved in I searched through all six of them, the garage and the basement, for what, I don’t know. Maybe more notebooks. I didn’t find anymore of his writing. It doesn’t seem to be something he had been doing his whole life. Now I find that I too have difficulty going upstairs. The rooms are all densely grey with winter light, echo with a feeling that I can’t name, but must have something to do with memory. Or a sour kind of love. Or a loving kind of hate. Most days I feel sick and alone. Mum won’t come up. Wants nothing to do with the mess. Except to say that we should sue the RCMP and the nursing home over his death. Incompetence, she says, They could have got you killed. They couldn’t have, of course, we know that. In a way it’s my own fault. I had let him go on with that pile of
food after all, got him that toy, and besides, I can’t bring myself to truly hear her out; it’s not what he would have wanted. He didn’t leave anything to her anyway.

The snow builds up on the roof and slips down like thunder and there’s not an ounce of comfort in it. Eerie, the way it skips and resounds along the cobwebbed walls, especially in the dark night. I have, however, found Grandpa’s piles of things to be effective at blocking much of the noise, so I’ve left the remaining ones where they were when he left. Somehow, though he’s gone, the piles seem to be growing taller, like trees. New ones springing up in the remaining space. I’ve cut myself a path through them to the kitchen and the bathroom from my spot on the couch.

Of course I did find one more notebook—in the fridge, behind a moldy bag of oranges on the top shelf—new, blank. Tonight, like every other night, I’ve taken the book back out, filled myself a glass of water—more for inspiration than anything else—and sat down at the kitchen table. Outside the French doors, the moon makes it through the weaving arms of the cottonwood periodically, like a searchlight.

I open the book, cold against my fingertips—

there he is

—and write.