



The Hunters Are Coming

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The Hunters Are Coming

A Thesis Presented

by

CHELSEA HOGUE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
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ABSTRACT

THE HUNTERS ARE COMING

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The Hunters Are Coming is a novel about the relationship between two sisters living in a polluted place called The Bay and the multiple ways that their experiences in nature are bound to unrelenting economic systems.

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INTRODUCTION

Our bodies are primarily comprised of water, a biological fact, but to say that one is living a watery embodiment carries a rather different significance. This is an awareness of the body in constant motion, or, a bodily conveyor belt, shifting temperatures and resources like thermohaline circulation—from the deepest, coldest parts of the ocean to its warm shallows. In the essay, “Hydrofeminism,” Astrida Neimanis describes this wateriness, or permeability, and the ways that it challenges the phallogocentric Enlightenment vision of discrete, atomized, and self-sufficient man: “We live in a watery commons, where the human infant drinks the mother, the mother ingests the reservoir, the reservoir is replenished by the storm, the storm absorbs the ocean, the ocean sustains the fish, the fish are consumed by the whale...”

According to the logic I’ve set forth in *The Hunters Are Coming*, a watery embodiment is a state of mind, one in which a subject is in close connection to the fluidity of a world shared by humans, animals, plants, geophysical bodies, etc. I attempt to imagine such subjects—sisters, Faith and Glad—who are hyper aware, if only by instinct, of the fact that they are porous material media, composed of both the sun’s warmth and the plastic pushed from one planetary sea to another. Through Faith’s perspective, their wateriness is seen, mostly acutely, through the slippery negotiations she makes to become beautiful, which starts to look a lot like a process of healing. One might ask: For a feminine subject, are healing and “becoming” one in the same?

Faith and Glad find themselves at The Bay—a polluted place, which holds significance to the others they meet for different and sordid reasons. (Because of its

pollutants, this is where the Faint believe their cancers began, and their return to it is something of a bitter pilgrimage.) Faith and Glad, however, have come to believe that The Bay is making them more beautiful—a process which is both divine and disgusting. For them, this process of becoming and understanding that they are The Bay as much as they are a they, is ecstatic. I think of these sisters as a mixture; they're both posthumanist and material, both real and aspirational, honest and dishonest. In creating this dynamic, I aim to propose that it's possible an attention paid to beauty isn't merely frivolous, as we might be accustomed to believing. Such an attention just might indicate an attunement to a higher (and potentially more just) order of categorization and social organization.

The ornithologist, Richard O. Prum, speaks to this idea of a “higher order,” by way of beauty, in his book *The Evolution of Beauty*. By focusing on Darwin's forgotten theory of mate choice, Prum proposes that beauty is not merely a metric of quality (as conventional evolutionary theory claims); instead, it is by our attention to beauty, and not utility (or adaptive mate choice, which relies on strict control and an ultimately rational need for extrinsically better mates), that humans will edge closer to equity and justice in our paths of social evolution. Consider gorillas and humans: In order to maintain order, ensure longevity, and some semblance of peace within a group of gorillas, dominant males use brutal force and threat to command mating access to females. Although humans are rapidly destroying their environments and disrupting this order, by and large, it works.

But, of course, this is not the only route for finding peace and security within a group. The other route is an aesthetic attention, which has evolved to de-emphasize the

basic need to procreate, and places preference on males and females resolving their differences, mates appealing to one another's desires, the female orgasm, queer relationships, etc. Beauty might very well be our best chance of circumventing those power structures which reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, structures which proffer brute force as the most viable tool for social organization.

Kant observed that the pleasure we take in beauty is inexhaustible, and I would add: so are our efforts to find it. Like Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, among many other feminist thinkers and writers, I believe that beauty is the often overlooked but critical component in conversations of social justice, and beauty can influence how we treat each other—especially in a cultural moment like ours, where there is no good analog for the changes we're experiencing, where it seems as if force is often countered with more punitive force.

Elaine Scarry's study, *On Beauty*, complements Prum's research and has also informed my thinking on this subject. Scarry submits that in our culture we have come to think of the distribution of beauty as a human right. And isn't it? Don't all humans deserve to see a beautiful sky? Don't they all deserve to look at their local bodies of water and see their own shimmering reflections? We do not make the case for equity among bodies and identities by negating beauty's presence altogether or attempting to diminish it. Instead, we advocate for latitude in our imaginations and definitions of beauty. We ask to accelerate the evolution of our thinking. We ask for more of it: beauty for everyone.

A few of Faith's desires for beauty might be seen as conventionally feminine, but most of them are slippery—she wants a strong neck, a body of taut ropes, a voice that

carries. In the sisters' insular world, they've accidentally upended a social paradigm and created new standards. Children are taught submission and how to comply, but Faith and Glad did not learn how to quote—just themselves and their interpretations of the books they read out of context and their grandmother's skewed logic. In this absence and circumscription, these sisters have become vain, outrageously so; but must vanity be inherently narcissistic? I don't think so. Vanity can also be a conduit for accessing something divine or holy, and finding that vibrant holiness within, instead of looking for it within their external environment—which doesn't, and has never, offered them very much. And, of course, holiness does not come cheap.

In *The Hunters Are Coming*, I thought about emphasizing what makes Odysseus describe Nausicaa's voice as green; the aesthetic extremity of birds; Proust's descriptions of people; that things can feel true without being true, which is a different kind of truth; when the body sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it, according to Wittgenstein. On some of these points, I am indulgent. In this novel, I am attempting to push past the line of reservation and follow itemizations of vanity and beauty to their extreme conclusions. So, I went further, as Simone Weil writes, "He who has gone farther, to the very beauty of the world itself, does not love them any less, but much more deeply than before." I wanted to capture all that I have, at one time, ruled out as beautiful, and then discovered I was wrong. I will never forget: the moments I discovered I was wrong.

ONE

“Kiss the wheels that brought you here,” Glad says.

I am Faith. Our grandmother said: “It is nothing to live in Faith if you can’t be Glad for it.” I am Faith, and my sister is Glad. Her nails are long where mine are ripped short. She’s a protecting sister. She scratches at the tinted tissue under both of my shoulders. She covers my wounds with cooked chew.

Pop-pep-pepper is the sound of a bird gun.

Glad fists my hair and handles me to the ground for a fix. Her fingers smell yellowish and I get hungry. It’s habit. I’m sideways and drowned between her legs. The water pulls. Splits. I twirl and get a hit. I dog sit. For her, I’m cigarette smooth.

She adds a perfect blue candy wrapper, a modest touch, and I swing the new rope back and forth. I like my hair tied and tailored where Glad’s more mustang. She puts on jeans under her t-shirt, and I take my time. I get naked. My legs are reborn and tingly and the ground goes gray. I grab into an electric green swimsuit that’s soft and eggy at the butt.

We throw handfuls of shocked minnows at the fire and hitch them out with serving spoons. It’s that, plus cold pepperonis in steak sauce we pinch with our fingers. Glad’s mouth drips with black burn. She smiles and looks punched. She holds the gag of food in her cheek and tongues the new hook at her lip.

“I feel that in my butthole,” she groans.

And licks more.

“Ladies!” The man calls; he watches us from down shore. “Ladies, oh, hello. Ladies.” The man’s hand makes a doll trumpet around his mouth. Birds dart to their hiding places.

“Faith,” he says. And I say nothing.

“Glad,” he sings.

We’re known here, famously, and Glad believes this is touching—to remain quiet until the time is opportune—but I believe she only waits until she’s discovered the perfect thing to say. I believe her whatnow in the morning and the little rag she covers her face with in the afternoon have a lot to do with this place, and the people here, and all their habits, which are strange, but we’ve grown to appreciate. For instance, there’s the smell of chopped cream candies hanging high in the air, and the way the ragged flower people wear towels around their necks, and their old, gray heads dream in clusters around The Bay, on the work day, or any day—and this is what I love. Around here, you can walk near the gravel road and someone might yell at you to get in the back, and when you decline, they sing out: Drive on, drive on, Babylon. And you watch them ride into the distance. For as long as you want. No one asks me if I’m in school here. Like the twins, they want our radio. No one says it’s certain or even please.

The man calls for us once more and makes a soft click with his tongue. We feel his watching. He lets his dog loose and runs after it, all around us, but we don't make a sound. We've got new bracelets and a canister of foreign salt. We've got volume two and six of a favorite read, a nutcracker, and our hands couldn't be more busy. At this hour, the beach is attractive. Our freshness is as it should be. Us two are a pool of mountain shade, broken fruit running thick down cold rock, and we think it's right to have our names warmed in the wind. We think this is all so much.

"Look, OK, Look, Who's There," the dog says. He comes close for a smell and bounds from left to right, just out of reach. I can hardly believe one man holds back all the dog wants. There's wind in his fur. Good dog ears, mean dog teeth.

Glad doesn't like it, the dog, so the holes in her nose spread and stiffen and her lower lip ditches. Her body is pointy as cold sea holly. Glad is an envelope of bones, such symmetry. During the storm that rocked the van and dumped wet glass down our windshield, the twins crawled to the roof and rode the van like horses in lightning. I think about the fear Glad and I both had during that, and the way Glad took my hand and asked if I felt it, too, and she had cold sick around her neck, but when I said "what," as in whatdoyoumean, she replied, "nevermind"—but really, even though I left it unspoken, I knew what she meant: Is that the ground? Did it move? A shake. But then the moment passed, and the fear left Glad's body, and we let the storm vibrate us into sleep, and so it wasn't so bad, not all that much trouble. I think about this and I feel

melty. I reach toward the dog's snarl, and it surges for the woods, galloping until swallowed by velvet.

"Louie, Louie, Louie, Here, Motherfucker, Here," the man calls and chases. They disappear.

I leave Glad pulling knees to chest—Glad, who won't go deeper than ankle—to walk in the water pinching my cold tits. I swim out to the dredge-spoiled islands where there's moon, bottle flies, cans, crews of vines, snakes, vinegarroons, lighters. A pocket of hovering dust flies makes it unbearable to be landed. Animals mimic animals. I dive once more, and I hover and float on the surface where the water's spell breaks, and finally, I am split perfectly in half, then further into nothing, rinsed of parts and person.

Glad watches me for a while. I can see her, hear even, though there's the tinkle. Glad likes to hold herself and monitor until she has enough. She looks for hungry fish in the whirlpools with a flashlight. She darts the light in the shape of a cross, hoping to catch teeth or legs in her trail, and I swim out to crucify myself to a dead stiff T where she searches. This makes her laugh. She loves it when I do things like that. I sneak to puncture a full jug. I dance around in the sand to leave mysterious trails for the morning. I leave a little dried blood on this or that handle. I never tell my secrets. I don't give my fair share.

In some ways we're a lot alike, Glad and I, in our high style, once bitten by two snakes, an ability to sing a strain or two. Together, we barter for breakfast buns—give them to us buttered, yellow-glazed, and hard, we yell. Give them to us just like that. All is real, all is well, like the sisters we are, it makes all the meaning when either of us enters.

But, of course, our differences are also clear-cut. Glad can sit windward and wait and be dumbfounded by herself, and while I don't blame her, I only want to be moved, over and over, nothing else. Just the good parts.

Glad says when I'm out there, far away, you can hardly recognize that I'm girl. I can be anything. I'm a girl like a lizard, who can both match a vibrant, green tuft and hide beneath a pile of dead leaves. Girls can live under almost any condition—most people don't know that. And Glad is right. I do not look like myself. I might be young but there is no part of a child left in my face. Usually at thirteen, you can see it in the cheeks, even if the body swells like a grave, but I was sucked dry, thrust into adulthood with a small chin. People often believe that Glad is younger than me and she laughs. "No, no, no." She shakes her ponytail so it hits both cheeks. "Not at all."

But I am becoming a beacon. I am crisp and changed in the hairline. There is a cold river in the center of my head.

I come out of the water bringing hornwort and moneywort to the surface. I wrap it in shredded bags, squeezing excess water. Small, unknown muscles in my forearm pinch

bone. This feels brand new. I take wood for more fire, let a ribbon loose, and watch it catch in a damsel tree. Glad gets midnight eyes, and this is when I love her most, at night, when her edges soften. I leak sweet spit for a fox hole and let the wind take a thin of bitten cheek. We push our gluey bodies inside blankets that smell like hickory wood and steam our feet.

Stars blink. The water's nearly flat, except for the slow rolls and thunks of bugs and bites and the white oil of moon stretched across its surface. Crickets saw. The night tucks the wild, veiny woods and water into fuzzy shapes—long surfaces of one thing, and over that, a second sound—and we wait for the horizon's final bar of green.

“They're here,” I say and shake Glad to upright.

“I hear a sound...” Glad clutches the teeth hanging from her neck and traces words of luck in the air.

The Faint enter warmly. through a crack and the light gets in. They make their way through a dark parted curtain, there, by the ruined bridge, where it's written in red paint: BE HAPPY. And in silver: COCK. And where Glad and I have added our names, and thoughtful ancients—with one final expression—have carved us questions and prayers: WHERE DID YOU COME FROM?

We wrote: a walk down the road

BEAUTIFUL. ANGEL. SWEET CAKE OF GRACE.

We wrote: many thanks

The Faint appear on shore as bobbing clusters, holding hands—always the same, yet they warm me in different ways. One carries a picnic and glittery candelabras. They pair up to party on unfurled blankets and pillows. Another, a wooden flute and quartered watermelon. Glad licks her lips. It looks that good; it looks better, and I get sea mouth from the hunger deep in my cheek pockets. Our perch is perfect and we can see all they do and all they move as they study only themselves and one another. A woman spins her wedding skirt in circles and tickles the faces of other Faint. The hunger settles in my upper gut. The skinniest Faint reach their fingers deep inside the warm stronghold of their pits and let the trees and sand make Faint-sized nests for their bodies. A wrinkled man with a rattlesnake hat band returns our stare—big eyes like two dead moons—and weeps. And beyond, there's another a bit like him. And one more a bit like him. There is no original; the clouds unzip.

From the direction of the trees we hear our distant names: "Faith. Glad." Hissing sounds. We can't determine from where, exactly, and we aren't sure we hear at all, but we know we have loves and hates hidden in every hole. No surprise. We keep an eye on the Faint and when I get bored, I trace the flyers' whorls in the sand and hope to not get stung. I lick my fingers and do it again. I suck a dirty knuckle clean.

There's a hit and I'm thrown. "My head!" I croak and clutch the impact. I get fatty in the mouth.

"What?" I yell. "Who?"

Glad reaches inside my arm flesh for bones to shush me and mean it. I sneer and grope around my skull.

"What will they do?"

Glad reaches for thigh. "Shut it, Faith."

"Faith." An echo from the treeline. I jerk to the left and right, ruffle the green striped blanket around me, and look for the source. A rock is at my back. I burn my eyes to train them, and there, the man with the dog, returning with a Coca-Cola. His dog is tied up, looking beat.

"Did I get you?" He's got a harelip, belly-thin scruff, and small, black eyes. He falls into the ground like home. He splays himself wide.

"Hey," he says. "I'm sorry about that."

We say nothing. Small white moths knock around the flashlight, and Glad can't take her eyes off the Faint. They hold each other and let their mouths hang. A lady with piled braids sits alone, drinking juice, and looking at knees. Several line up and cup their palms to take big gulps of The Bay. They act hungry, like it's the best thing in the world to touch their lips. They giggle and show off. It's wetting their chins and shirt fronts, but they don't care. They feed each other from their dirty shovels. Some are small and bald and weak and they make starfish clusters on the backs of the others who are strong and misplaced and there to help. The Faint can be described as peaceful and slow, but not gentle, strictly speaking—even though they aim to be. What I mean by this is they digest every step with a watch for poison spots and set traps, but we also spy them grabbing and pinching when they want something, and not often accepting no for an answer.

“You don't remember me?” The man lowers his voice to not upset Glad; he tries to open me. He takes a tiny pebble and throws it toward the water.

I whistle for it.

“Do you have a smoke?...Money?”

“Neither,” I say. I heat, I shiver, and Glad grunts. I can smell the man's after dinner and feel a little sick. He lifts up his flannel and shows me dozens of lesions. He touches one to show it's wet. They have dried matter and a little honey in them. I take seven fast breaths and my spit runs. When I touch something whole and well-kept, for instance,

my own smooth leg, I think of passenger liners and chaise lounge chairs moved by greased wheels, but when I touch something raw and rainy, I think of young soils with poor horizons.

“You’ve got an infection,” I say.

“I do,” he says.

“Your name?”

“Gabriel.”

Gabriel reveals a thermos in his pants and drinks. I take a slug and nibble on the chewy bits. His dog’s organ extends long and orange; Gabriel’s fingernails are painted similar. I put a saltine to his lips and he nibbles its edges, letting the noisy crumbs stay, and he settles.

Glad is fixed. The man with the snake hat pulls a canoe down to the water and an old woman with white pigtails gets inside. She sits in the bottom and he puts his face close to hers so they can talk swift and private. I feel relief to finally arrive at this part. I wait by pointing to the bruises left on my legs and arms and taking inventory. I divide my body into quadrants. The lines of wispy fog run between the whisperers and us and it all looks like a thick, wet painting.

Gabriel can't help himself. He asks about the twins as he picks at his body but we don't know anything. Isn't that true? Glad uses her back teeth to cut a wasp from her hair. Gabriel points to my t-shirt, a picture of an olive on the front, and says he used to have one a bit like it. I grin a little to think of our match, but Glad stomps her foot and makes a cutting gesture with her hand.

My mind travels.

We're young weeds, me and Glad, with our grandmother, straining to listen for a tornado wreaking around the distance. We play cards on the porch and watch the dyed sky feather toward the ground and coil back into the atmosphere. Dusty parks in the garage, stinking it up—the last visitor we would have—and pees our bed. Our grandmother covers his body with newspapers, and we wait out the storm on couch cushions piled inside the kitchen cabinets. When Glad believes I've gone to sleep, she teepees the sheet so she can touch her insert with full expression; however, I am awake, listening to our grandmother drag a dry mop, always awake, and holding my breath in impressive increments.

“Thank you,” says the woman in the canoe, “thank you, thank you.” Hard horse brushes of hair poke from either side of her face. She says thank you to everyone, individually, and it even seems, for a moment, that she also says thank you to us. I tell myself, blink eight times.

She closes her eyes and the crowd on shore pushes. The canoe blades through the water and shoots to The Bay's center. The woman drifts and the wind carries her—the first seagoer of the sea—through the channel and down the neck and the damp, eventually, toward the ocean's waves. The Faint are quiet. The old woman is ready to burst forth. She has the confidence of a wild beast, waving all ways, until no sound can reach her. She gets low and her snowy head disappears. She's a sea snail or Alexander the Great in a bathysphere, voyaging to a world no one she knows has ever seen or heard of before, until now.

The crowd points and smiles when they see a deer eating in the brush. The deer freezes. The deer runs away from them. And they clap for it. They finish drinks, lick fingers, and hug necks after the old woman's canoe shrinks into the mist. They walk back together, from where they entered, behind a scattershot of flashlights and headlamps, and in the debris, oh, in a warehouse of treasures, their greased faces, the bumps on their chins shine through. There, the twins remain. They stand still among the left-behind bottles and paper sacks. Glad waves ten fingers. She gives a shy hoot and something we can't see hoots back.

Rex and James are twins like a cartoon, same height, same black chin-length hair, same tongue that thickens at a laugh. They have a cartoon's habits. Causeless. Big hands. No reason for doing anything except the hell of it.

But I know the difference between them. Rex has rough cheek, James a bill on the front of his lip. Someone should spray them down, even though they are the type of twins who would come back, no matter what—but more than that, I want to see them press their widow’s peaks together and rub them side to side for fire. They may not understand when my sister and I speak, but everyone agrees, they are tall. They hit the ground and hunt, gathering coins and crusts.

Rex brings olive loaf and meat stars and assortments, and we eat until we burst. The twins are excused when they bring gifts. James wants to taste mine and licks. It’s the same. There’s a shiny baseball cap for Glad. She stuffs her hair in it and plants kisses on Rex’s neck.

“He’s my first new lover,” Glad said when she met Rex, and he said he smelled her out.

There’s an earring for whoever wants it. James brings a tobacco pipe carved like a peanut, bulging and lit, and we finish that, and find things to fill it again—small corns, pine straw, who knows, and I vomit up a small charm in one good cough, deep as water.

“What do we have here?” Gabriel points across the water to the sliver of sand just above the water’s edge.

We squint in the direction and the boys laugh and we snap, snap, snap. Rex can’t find it and gets angry.

“Where? Where? Tell me.”

Glad takes his face and points, where there lie two bathers in the breeze, eating the filling out of each other. Listen past the wind, and there’s the sweet strains of lovers.

“Oh la la,” Glad says and makes a clicking sound with her tongue.

We all laugh which inspires another laugh. The frogs croak, “Love, Love.” But the question is: Whose song is it? The frogs croak, “Yours, Yours.”

Gabriel leaves, and James leaves, full of drink, and Glad rides Rex like a Great Dane, toward the van, and I am all alone. I’m left right here, on the sand; I am the sand, textural and crystal, gifting the musk of distant seas, from the desert dunes, the dark quartz, from the middle of Utah’s pink, the volcano beaches, the sinking beaches, sifting through fingers, clogging drain pipes, sand carried by wind and water, right here, on this shore, in the van, sponging off, reading stories to the birds crying, musket, musket, musket, teasing wild dogs, pulling fish, wrapping oysters in briny blankets, burying the bad, digging up the very good.

Glad returns for me to scratch her belly. It’s late and the left side of her face is crusted with blood and a plastic heart dangles from a mound swelling near the top of her ear. I scratch slowly. Ffft, Ffft, Ffft. I will be late. I can’t close my eyes to the extinguished

beach. I pick at the crust along my sister's neck; she swats, so I worry to trace my own blue shadow.

TWO

We come from the rotten house where we slept eye-to-toe. Under the floor was a soft brown drink. Inside the lamps were biters and non-biters. We felt the carpet's misty in the back of our throats, and our grandmother filled her lungs with fiery smoke. We put vaseline on our legs to kill dust itch, our sheets were heavy with wax. And broken.

Our grandmother had bad neck, fever, and tall cheeks. We saw her as a man—her big, flat body—and she did, too. Our grandmother was many things. Her hand couldn't close a fist, but her jaw could crack PVC pipe. We avoided her in the afternoon, and most days, she sat by the window listening to tapes of two or three singers, or she made a pudding, or plugged a hole with thick globs of glue and advertisements.

She crawled up the stairs in spells. We could become stranded on the second floor where there was one bed, fifteen boxes of old dish and touchy, achey stuff—unopened envelopes our grandmother would snap her teeth if we touched, which made us laugh, which made us touch and run. If we wanted to go down the stairs, or say we wanted to go up, at the very moment our grandmother sat on a middle step fighting for breath, she would make a cutting gesture with her hands, as if we had opened the door, discovered her there on the toilet and stayed to stare.

Our grandmother wanted to not be watched, so we found treasured ways to see her through cracks and behind corners. She looked like an ancient, firm bird heating babies like a machine. She shivered without breeze. Her hands smelled of bleach.

In the evening we bathed for four or more hours, listening to the swallows shake down in the eaves. Our grandmother instructed us, how to clean and what needs cleaning again. In spells, she added detergent and water from the stove. It steamed like nickel and ignited our nipples and inserts. We beat our toes against the mix. We read books out loud and let our voices hurl around the bathroom tile.

“Rejoice for me,” our grandmother said, and we read louder about the Battle of Waterloo. We put our teeth to the porcelain for the sound effects of Medea riding off into the sunset on a golden chariot with her sweet, dead children.

We waited naked by the window to see them, sailing across the tangerine and smoke.

In the evenings we sat in the litter of the front room. These were final days. It was late April. Our grandmother crushed chips to fine powder and fed them to the wood of her mouth. Glad and I held bowls of sweet cereal melt, mine between my thighs, Glad’s on the hard biscuit of her swollen breasts. We rubbed our cheeks on the blue curtain and cut small holes there only we could find. I heard a rustling on the porch and guessed devil; our grandmother guessed three shots from a pistol; Glad guessed fresh eggs raining down the windshield. We heard another sound and guessed again.

Our grandmother fished her fingers to catch a bug in her hair and cupped it tight, and with the bug struggling in her sealed palms, she told us a story she loved to tell, the one about Jewels, a woman whose feet never touched the ground. She told us Jewels didn’t

wear shoes because she was carried everywhere she wanted to go. Our grandmother told this story often, and before bed, and we hated it.

When our grandmother was in a good mood, she opened a fresh pack, wore a shiny slipper, told this story, and made plans to see the ducks swimming and snatching bread in the lobby of the Grand Ole Opry, do a dinner on the riverboats with all-you-can-eat roast and honey butter pressed into spring tulips. We memorized our grandmother's stories and called them back in our winter voices when we were alone. We knew what stood two miles to the east, a restaurant where all diners get one slick pickle, and a dress shop to the southwest, although with our own eyes we had no such experience. Incubate your clutch. We would wait, and then we would be ready. We would be highly focused, full grown, with hair-dos.

“On that day, I will cast my eye over the wonderful heads of my two little hens. You will transform yourselves into an entirely different, entirely beautiful shape.”

“When? And when?” we asked.

“Without warning,” our grandmother said.

There are a few parts and words of the story of Jewels our grandmother liked to repeat.

“Carried,” she pronounced. And: “Everywhere.”

She waited until we were looking, up from our food or the books across our laps.
“Everywhere.”

“Jewels’ hair would wrap around the soul pocketing her. Like a scarf grown for two. When Jewels shifted in her chair, the person to her left scooped her while the bartender searched for a more comfortable one.”

In the story everyone in town took turns carrying grown Jewels, wrapped in her heavenly hair. They put her in a wheelbarrow or latched her to a strong back. Everyone did this except for Jewels’ father, who was insanely jealous of Jewels. Mostly, he was jealous of his wife’s run of love and patience for her—carrying her to the toilet, safeguarding her with a silk sheet.

One night, Jewels woke up overcome with fear. What would happen if she were forced to walk on soft, tender skin? In her nightmares she had to ask: What if she became degraded by the soil lines of earth between her toes? In the middle of one night Jewels’ father lifted her from bed, drove for hours in a neighbor’s car, and dropped her in the middle of a corn field two towns away. Jewels rang the glass bell she kept in her front pocket, the one with a red crystal tongue, but no one appeared—none of her neighbors, not the bartender with a seat, not her mother, no one carried her to the kitchen, no one made her tea, and no one told her that she was still a delicate thing.

“What happened to her?” I asked.

“Tell her.”

Even then, my sister had a scrubbed face. “Died,” she said.

We found our grandmother on the back porch where the steps belly mud and moss. The sun had not yet risen. The field was creased with fog like thin, wrinkled linen.

“If we go to the state, we’ll be Dirties,” Glad said.

We rolled the cash from our grandmother’s slipper into hundreds and hid bundles around the van’s folded seats. We moved her porcelain cat to her left dress pocket. We tightened her thin hair, criss-crossed her hands, plugged each ear with ear-sized rocks. Glad made me watch myself eat in the bathroom mirror so I wouldn’t forget the attention my mouth needs to chew, and by evening we were gone, our grandmother where we found her, shrunk to a scoop of what she had been—except for the shred zone surrounding the gibbosus bulging from her nose. I covered her with a thin blanket. What’s worse, we added no flowers. Her skin would tear if we touched, but we agreed, it was no longer on fire.

We used the back field for practice and wrote our initials in tire rut, the F lost in the G. From the rearview mirror, I watched the skinniest trees give up. The tall grasses and depleted light. Our grandmother's house and all of our unfinished business shrank into a small dot of space.

I told Glad the Dirties would soon be camped in our attic, and we both knew if Dirties lived with you one week, they lived with your neighbor the next. If you think you don't have a Dirty, check again. If you think you don't have a Dirty, smell the air. Do you smell boiled eggs abandoned on the stove? Do you smell a sick leg, weeping green fluid?

There would be no one to lotion and bury her. For days, if I mentioned our grandmother, or asked where we were going, my sister would pull over and beat on me everywhere except my face, so I kept private thoughts about our grandmother's greedy lips and grandmother tongue.

Of course, since then, I've seen blue and green waves, rocks clefted with slick straws and dirty diapers, and I pee on a flat rock to see our grandmother's face. We raise 12 cups of wine in her honor. We ask for her sweet forgiveness for we know that no one was around to wipe the shelves, seal the lid, look out twice and blink a flashlight in the roof's creases. No one would let the Dirties know: It's hot here.

THREE

We watch another one go. Willows in the reeds. That's what the twins say. We watch Jimmy, the poor Faint, drink a gallon of juice. He has a pleasant face, although it looks like everyone's. Jimmy takes a poll to ask the others what to do, how to send off, and what do they think. He throws a hatchet at a tree, leaves it quivering, and pushes off shore holding a puny torch. This is another's vision, but I admit, Jimmy plays it marvelously. On his knees, he looks toward the horizon. We crouch. We scurry around to avoid the dark shadows of the moon.

It used to be that you knew a Faint by the souvenirs anchoring their necks, heavy bottles filled with sand, strung brittle claws, dusky things. We've been told. They were slow as cypress but loved everything about this place and couldn't walk five steps without wanting to get more of it, and every part, the live and unalive things. The leaves and people, too. They'd suck the crispies from the local's elbows; they loved them that much. They wanted everything to do with them—hungry but cute. One of the twins said that. The Faint softened themselves up and down the beach, all among us. They brought platters of sandwiches, gave everybody hand jobs, and never asked to be in charge. They took big gulps from their canteens and puked hot stew on their fronts.

But now the Faint dress nicer. They check into motels with new linens, wear clean sandals, leather backpacks, and they tip. On some nights their shirts match. Although they still keep canteens filled with The Bay's water which they occasionally sip, it's not laced with homemade juice and local's gifts. They decided the locals ask too much and

play dead, only to wake up and ask for more, and when things are tough and tight, like rabbits—according to the Faint—they scoot, scoot out of the way.

The Faint now come with guides advising where to convene, where to not, longterm lovers, and except for Jimmy, elaborate plans. When it's clear we can see their afternoon rest from where our van is parked, under a fuchsia tree dropping bells the color of blood. They're hazy shapes on the eastern horizon. They look pleased to sit in a private cluster, splay-legged, letting the sun brighten their thongs and thighs, nibbling raw shrimps and fish-filled potatoes. By and large, they give each other Catholic kisses and maintain moderate sips of The Bay to reunite them with the booklice, the semi-slugs, the swamp cabbage, and the sandworms, bypassing the sedimentation tanks and flocculators that are supposed to make water drinkable. The Faint trace themselves on this shore to commune with the rainclouds, get a modest amount of sand in their teeth, and kiss the sad-eyed dolphins. They gather here because The Bay is where their afflictions began.

For some minutes after we lose sight of Jimmy's boat and body, we can see the twinkle of his fire, moving side to side in a faint but gorgeous rainbow. And then, Jimmy's flame tries, but it's also gone.

“Make a wish,” Glad says.

“What is yours?”

“Leather gloves,” she says. “I’d take a flute.”

I want four hundred years.

A woman wearing a panama hat drops her bottle, and a little pond of foam rises. She crouches low, our level, and telescopes a hand. She sees us, watching, and waves one dry finger. Come closer. Out of the side of her mouth, she makes a chainsaw noise. It’s a joke we don’t get. Her dinner was spicy. She’s got a hoola hoop and a wet belly.

“No.” Glad whispers. She gets shy and puckers her lips. “Wait here.”

“Why?”

Some Faint rises with a violin and the woman waves at us again, looking spoiled, I think, but what do I know. “Why?” I say.

As soon as I’m close enough, the woman offers oily cheese on cracker and bulb of spring onion. I look at her and do not look away. She’s Aubrey, she tells me, and once knew a pig named Faith. I ask for the pig’s birthday and she says “prime time.” And the music plays, and Glad sulks, afraid, and the twins are nowhere to be found.

I love the cheese and tell her so. I tell her loudly and she gives me another, this time getting close enough that I can smell her arm, rough grasses and newspaper. She’s a

woman on a different deck. Her top of silk strings is blown and her hair's blown. I think of a gift: a basket, a moustache, a piece of mast, the crumbled skin from my lower lip, goggles, red sauce, such and such idea.

"Ain't life sweet?" Aubrey smiles and a piece of her bubblegum tongue fishes her gap.

"I've seen some fucked up stuff," she says. "But, finally, it all feels right and good here. It's been 20 years since I've had a good time, until now. It's not the best here, but fun doesn't have to be."

"Like what?" I say. "What have you seen?"

"Let's see." Sweat accrues in the shelter of her neck.

"Men and women tasting the drip that drops from the bottom of a truck, a mother sick with worms, a lost bet means a dog's left foot. I've seen taxmen chase military men, scaling up the side of an electric fence," she says.

"I'm sooo old." Her liver lips search for the last of the liquid in her cup. But she doesn't look it, that old, sooo old. She eats another cracker wolfishly, a pinch of cognac-cured meat.

"How old?" I ask.

“I watched Beowulf get buried,” she says. She pours more. There’s a rider under her eye, a mark of good fortune, and I tell her so.

“A savings is for spending. Everything. I’m leaving nothing. I have children who have children and none of them will forgive me.”

My body emits slow steam from its creases, so I try to remain crease free. I sit on the ground before her and spread out like a spangled star on her blanket. She does the same. I’ve seen so many of the sick and the weary, and Aubrey doesn’t seem to be any of that. She’s no dog unto death. I’ve seen a man scrape nasty from the bottom of a boat with his fingernail. He did it over and over until someone put a stop to it by lifting him off the ground, by wrapping their arms around his Thanksgiving, but as soon as they weren’t looking, he did it again. He was given free cake, which made him lick his lips. He held that piece of cake and watched that cake, but then he smelled his fingers. He pretended his focus was the cake but I could see that he was eating the nasty. A few of them stay a long time here. They marinate together, tell jokes, a sparkling jar of preserved lemons—until they also disappear.

“I knew Jimmy when he was a little boy,” Aubrey says.

“What will happen to him?”

“He slapped me across the face,” she says. “We were just kids. But I still remember. He could hold his fists tight and make his eyeballs shake in their sockets. Scary. Scary stuff.”

I look for Glad and find her watching us, watching Aubrey the same way, like I am, as Aubrey covers her tattoos with algae. Her affection comes from her knees. She tells me she’s been sick for all of these years.

“That’s me,” she says, “pumping gas. But now I want life all around me, for now, I want to see lines and colors and lightning flashes. Does that make sense?”

I tell her it does and she pours me mermaid milk. I drink it fast and pour more and feel settled.

“I didn’t offer, but go on,” she says.

I do, and I get humorous.

I don’t look at everything and wonder if it’s beautiful or not, but I do look at Aubrey, The Bay, the people, their hats, my own feet and hands, with this in mind. The body is a landscape. How do we mold it? Start with the center point. Open it up. Once you’re cracked to the core, and the steam is let out, you’ll be able to elevate. I know there are many things which inspire a joy under my fingernails, the excitement of brand new or extremely old, shiny with love, and those same things might puzzle someone else. James

found a handful of changing room tags once, hooked to clothespins, beneath the sand, and he gave those to me. I tried to describe it to Glad, but she didn't understand. Open the organs, I told her. Make them beautiful. Find a fireball from heaven. I told her how the numbers hung from my small ears and anchored my neck. I tried again.

A week later Mr. Wang prays to get penetrated by the microwaves of salvation. He stands on a box and waves us goodbye. Aubrey holds my shoulder and sees my fluency. I feel myself shining in the dark. I put a night nut in her teeth and tell her to break but not chew.

She repeats, "Break but not chew."

"Hold it there and lengthen the folds of your neck. Roll the cracked husk between two favorite teeth."

"Whatever you say." She wipes the vomit that splashes her chest with a pocket handkerchief.

There are many things to like about this place. That you can't see the moon all of the time. The Bay is filled with trash cats, the trick mirrors from the cigarette shop, the woman praying in the johnboat with her shiny babies, rocking and repeating. Some say a bomb went off here and the locals have lumped skin in their cheeks, from pieces of palm and stone shrapnel that traveled faster than bullets. They sip slowly in the morning until evening, and Aubrey snatches their swamp sunflowers, her flat, big hands

like wings. I tell her I believe these people here are the way they are because of the quicksand pits you can't see until it's too late. James says the pits are from stalled hurricanes in late summer. But we don't mind. We walk up and down this beach. I put my hands at shoulder height so my fingers don't swell and listen to the sunners strange music.

The next week, Sarah Lee leaves cussing mad in a silk skirt. She doesn't say goodbye to anyone. Aubrey waves to the girl gliding out alone and blows her a kiss. Aubrey's t-shirt shows her belly. She touches it. A long locked chain clanks around her wrist when she moves. She re-invents her face every time.

For our lips, we eat four domed mushrooms. They will be precisely smooth. Aubrey looks the best among them. We tell her so and she savors our thoughts. She makes a fire bigger than any of us want, holds up her chained wrist, and informs that she has thrown away the key.

“Joan of Arc, they're looking for you,” she says. “But I'm not going back.”

Glad is moved, and we know at this moment that Aubrey is ours. I would make something, a meal. For us, this meal would probably count for nothing, but a meal can hold you, carry you to nowhere, exactly where we want to be.

The next week, Charlie G. eats a whole duck with skin that's chewy orange leather. Aubrey and I eat algae by the handfuls, putting one foot in front of the other and munching through the woods and shore. The shit comes fast.

A Faint gives Glad a sandwich and asks if she's ever been to California.

"You could model."

She shows her feet and hands and spins. We bring fish on sticks and the old men put dollar bills in my boot. Aubrey brings a bar of Ivory soap and the Faint bathe each other's backs and ears. Some are silents and eat nothing. One of them teaches me an ancient dance, but I'm not very good at it. I just like to take their final sips and sway, even though no one seems to like that from me. I sway, sway, swish, sway, swish, swish. That's it.

Of course, there are others who don't prefer us and make it known—Felicia, Nag, Margaret, and Jackson's witchlike nose. They're scared hyenas; they clutch their liquor when we walk by and put down three layers of precious towel before they sit and stare at a sky so filmy you could eat it.

It's the early morning when we finally walk back to the van, full, and it's hard to believe, but more happy. I tell the ground: be sand and dirt! I tell The Bay: illuminate! I tell the pine tree: light or no light, it's all the same!

And to the homebound Faint: Goodbye, half dead. Goodbye, winning troops. Goodbye, fortune shit. Goodnight, smart ass. Sylvester, goodbye. Señor, goodbye. Goodnight, Louie.

FOUR

I'm reeling. My face feels deformed. I open the cooler and vomit instinctively on the smell of old fish. Gabriel is there, a mouth torn from liquor, and waiting. He doesn't care about the filthy smell. He's a trembly thing, a face concave, getting greedy for my ankles, for their small bones and firm handle. I shake my leg and he gives me a glance at all of his teeth. Rex and James feed their gashes with black slob and busy their eyes in another direction, like the instrument that appears in a lap, and he plays it, the two of them lost and lush. Their sounds are both peaceful and suspicious. They make the sounds of high flying masts. They can bring comfort and all of my anger. Gabriel's fingers move from my ankle to the calf to the knee.

James has a song, especially for me, about a lonely shark. He plays it up to the part where the lonely shark thinks it's her mother she sees, but it's only a piece of giant coral drug through the water by a thief with a crane.

I will fall back into the sea. I will travel in the direction I stare.

I hear a gurgle and Gabriel's wet, but I'm already asleep.

FIVE

Am I alive? I ask myself this when I'm buried up to my head in sand. I go up in smoke or dissolve into a million tiny silver beads. Nutrients, I call it. What's in the ground is in our smiles. I must have been born in the ferment of The Bay, and if you've never seen the tinsel in your own teeth, you can't understand this or me. Glad says it looks as if I'm trying to hatch something. She yawns. She pats her underchin. She talks looking in the mirror. I hear shouting when no one is present and Glad believes it's the echoes or my own distant cocoon. The past rushes to the present and leaves me stunned.

Speechless. Although I'm not trying to say nothing, I know that's how it comes out. I say nothing because I'm tired and full. I'd rather swim or pry or wash or read. I'll read anything—stories. I'll read recipes and guides. I don't care what the stories are about as long as the main character seems real but not too much so. The story's possible to imagine but I simply haven't yet and I feel greeted and welcomed by all I must've met during a long, strange sleep. I like it when groups of young people get together to sweep out evil, or a young girl feels so lonely she sinks her head into her crying chest until something saves her, often what's least expected, or what she has to make up for herself. And then she has to find a way to live like that, making the decision that she doesn't care if everyone else knows one thing which they might call more real, she's going to live as if there's another, better truth. My blood is calling out for you! The lonely girl could say things like this to other character or a favorite reader. I usually misremember the important parts of what I read. At times I am hollow and hard and no longer respond to fresh burnings. I can only bear to cut every other line into my heartbone. In my mind the creature in Frankenstein runs joyously across the tundra while his creator floats

around the chunky water, a cold raft for needy ice birds. Finally free! Like a man in love. Like a divine baptism, rinsing the soot from his occupied brow. After he loses sight of his creation, the creator forgets his purpose and stares at the white light all around him, never blinking, and is forever blinded by the punitive reflection of sunlight against snow. Every now and then I think about the blind creator, content and now knowing why, and remember my lasting impression, how I felt as if we had something in common. We both wanted to be good, but mostly we were rotten and spoiled, not by fortune, but by our stupid efforts. I, like him, also wish I could hold onto the tailgate of a truck and let my body drag helpless and satisfied across a field of cold, hard snow.

By two, the heat in The Bay becomes intolerable. The water is full of a thick olive-green, millions of bracken fronds. The fish are relentless. They poke and nudge to the surface. They'd settle for anything. So would we. The cove fish beach themselves reaching for blades of grass, their bellies of soup. I throw them back in only to later find them beached all over again. I cut a nut out of their thirsty throats and hoard it. The dark of my hair bakes and I'm a werewolf. The small sailors who fall asleep on the night sand, clutching warm, shiny mirrors to see up girls' skirts, finally wake. They begin to crawl toward a woman slightly taller than a boogie board but get distracted.

On this day, my favorite day, I take a vow of silence. I'm the sweaty, mad monk of Framingham, pulling weeds in his and his neighbor's gardens. When I finally open my mouth, three day's worth of steam pipes out. The water's skin is hot; its bottom is not. The animals scream and mate and leave hot stick in the leaves. A flock of sick birds fall

in a bright red puddle, hot earthbound heaps of feathers. Hot things—bad dreams, after dinner, irregular galaxies, super-hot blue stars, live coal, stomach acid—need to touch their counterparts in cold things—egg whites, milk of magnesia, apricots, orange stars, new moons—with their arms spiraling outward. This is their aspect.

Glad and I lurk in lawn chairs until our hair's crisp as crackers. Across the water, families let their naked babies loose in the warm shallows. The old women in visors yell “yee-haw” to sell saucy tamales on napkins. Rex and James move along the shore calling out, “Water!”

But they don't have it.

Glad's bikini has fringe that hangs to her upper thighs and a few judiciously-placed gold beads make jingles when she jumps, which she does—is doing. Everyone around here asks where my sister comes from and they love it, they really love it, when she says, “Right here.” Her brown face, the forehead of an athlete, shined with lemon. A woman's angle, some child's nose. Glad smiles in perfect control and never shows the grit stacked in the back of her jaw.

Rex throws down his backpack. His lips are red churned and he tastes and tastes it. He puts an arm under my sister so she can sit on his bicep like Glitter Girl with her legs crossed, but he can't, even though my sister is tiny. She's short of breath from hitting the sand and has grated blood on her butt; she laughs and slumps over in a way that shows

more bones. Perhaps we look a lot alike, even though we're half sisters, and unlike the twins, were properly cleaved.

The twins are bent on being men. James puts his hand around the back of my neck, squeezes, chickens me around, and my drink sloshes. I am this big, he seems to say, and it's important for me to remind myself to remind you, I will hold tight, even if the coast shrinks and folds me into a steaming dumpling of self, I am this big!

Soon after we arrived at The Bay, James looked at me across the fire and squinted.

"Get a mirror," he said and spit a little blood. I did, and I looked for what, as the others watched.

"Do you see what I mean?" he said.

And I nodded, yes, I did. The bottoms of my feet have grown hard as hooves here and peel off in mouse papers. I now have dark marks, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, splashed across my arm. My hair has grown long down my back, roped with salt swamp sediment, and lightened to a thin wine. Glad's has the glint of sunfish. She says it's the mermaid milk, which is tinted blue and ends in spicy nibbles, that makes us so beautiful, and I think she might be right, but I also think she fails to notice how much more I've changed. While she's always received the Well-Uh look, and while the Australians knocked on our windows looking for her, not two but four times, people are

beginning to give me things: sugar cubes from a naked sunner, fried catfish strips in patterned tissue. Not to mention the sunner's son, who ran a handful of blue babies on my hook and showed me a secret spot to let my line rest. I get looks from the broad-footed boys who walk like ducks. I want to throw them pieces of bread! Make a trail in a giant spiral! Lead them to the water's froth...

It was around this time, although it could have not been, that the twins took the tires off our van. They bought us gifts: matching t-shirts, long as dresses, that say "Bahama Mamma," and under that a sexy cocker spaniel gulps milkshake.

"We did this," they said, "so you would always stay."

James flips on the hidden speaker in his camo backpack. He breaks sticks, says if the wood is good or dead or infected or wet or dry, and throws the infected sticks as far as he can into the woods.

I fall from my chair and roll until I reach the water's edge. Glad throws a shoe at me. It's dripping season. I lick my lips and eat pink seaweed. My face pulls. I cough from my gut and spit out a baby's black barrette. I keep rolling until I hit water and then I drag myself down under. My ripped cuticles cool. I pee, a pinched hose, fast and forceful. I pull my underwear over for shit, too, but my bowels shy.

On most days silt clouds the wave crests, but I still open my eyes underwater, pry mollusks off flattened rocks with sharp garbage so the pads of my fingers don't grow blood bubbles. With a plastic bag in one hand and a half pipe, half saw, I can swim so my belly grazes the bottom, scooping shrimp, stabbing mackerel. I bite open violets with my teeth and nibble their bloodless flesh until the shells are clean. Stamina is what the mollusks offer. My fingers have grown long and slender in the water. My body taut ropes.

Down here many dark things are hidden, from me, from the fish themselves, from all of us. Some fish shrink from the moon, others haunt. In the spring, they hide with fat bellies of roe. In late summer the mother of young dogfish receives them back through her loins, the same entry, same path they took for birth. The Glaucus fish opens her mouth and her young swim the length of her fat throat until danger passes. Some fish swim alongside bodies like mine, running through their tribes, attending them as a convoy, voyaging around, this side and that, pushing forward from the helm and at the stern. They take on my motion. I've learned that not all fish have like range. They can be flushed by their hates, which are simple and sure. Some feed in the low shores, off sand and what it breeds. Their hate can be found in the predators of deep waters. Others feed in the shallows and mud. Their hate can be found where water is coldest. Others feed in the green-fringed streams, under weedy grasses, and their hates are swift with large cut mouths. The most righteous fish feed where the ocean meets its neighbors, in the rivers and lakes, where sweet water ceases from brine, where alluvial silt gathers, is leached

from the land by eddying currents. These fish feed only on pleasant food. They fatten themselves on sweet things, and their hate is me.

I come out with my t-shirt dragging and leave it. Rex stands behind Glad with his arms up for trust falls. I hold up an algae bloom. My fists are full. It slides down and sits dark in my gut, and Glad bares her teeth so I can see the strength in her mouth.

Unlike my sister, I haven't met lovers. Before Aubrey I met a Constance who asked to be called Connie for short, a mistake. It isn't odd but it's true that everyone I meet eats old, dry bread. Everyone sees my sun skin and says, Lookit. Look at that little piece of leather. And so I do.

Look at my skin.

"Are you having a good time?" my sister asks, showing a hard companionship between us that changes the lines of her mouth.

"Fine," I say.

This is The Bay where young people with no visible pores come to swim and touch each other on the neck, but so far we are it. She asks again and I tell her I'm content to lie here with underwear sticking, chewing into fruit strip. It's like eating pants. Rex picks

me up from behind and spins me so my face is near the ground. I yell. Rex laughs, shows all of his polluted mouth, and my sister agrees, “Put her down.”

He doesn’t understand. He lowers my body to let the tips of my hair meet the water. I can see my sister’s name, carved and beginning to scab on his left forearm: GLAD.

“You’re gripping too tight,” I scream. His GLAD arm pushes the shit from my belly toward my chest where it doesn’t want and shouldn’t go.

“Enough!”

Rex has a goiter covered in scratched acne, and from that bulge he lips a thin cigarette. His pork rind skin disgusts me but also makes me proud for what I know—that Glad suffers under his weight instead of feeling pleasure.

“Please!” I scream.

“Fine as anything,” Rex mocks and puts me down. James gets on the ground to mimic the way I recline—“Please! Please!”—with one hand propping his neck.

“I’m sorry,” Glad says, “but it’s true. That’s the way you do it.” She dabs at the sores in the corners of her mouth and sits in Rex’s lap to suck the salt from his earlobes.

I take one of the twin's cigarettes and walk down the beach, gathering Dutchman's Pipe. I taste it and my tongue dries. I find a quiet spot to hunker and flex. I rip up handfuls of panic grass while shit burns down my leg. Glad and I call it In the Depths when we can squat and heave, then jump around, free as dust, and be brand new. We were taught that the Lord formed the first man from a dust devil. He corralled it, shaped it into Adam, and breathed him life through a nostril. And it's from that single breath that we were given a secondary soul. When we were much younger, we said prayers for everything—meals, new clothes, a good day, a sudden storm, prayers for anger and cruelty. Our grandmother told us stories of God's benevolence and his fury.

She drilled: "How will he love you?" And answered: "With ten hot lashes."

"He'll leave you anxious and afflicted."

"Our God hates as much as he loves."

We forgot about prayers here, or we stopped talking about them. God is now a taste that won't clear our mouths.

I wash the loose shit from my thighs and sit on a drum near the water to rub my calves with muddy sand and gray-purple buds. A hideous dog tears the last chunk of fruit strip from my fingers, only to purge. Stupid, but another thing I like.

A man approaches me with bright fake mouth. A metal detector is strapped to his chest. He waves his hand when I try to introduce myself. He knows. He's Nicholas and he's sturdy. He tells me it's going to rain. He knows this by his boyfriend, Daryl, and Daryl knows this by the leaves, convection waves, and his pets.

"Don't you remember them? Everyone whistles when we pull them in a wagon down the beach, which makes them bark and hiss and scream."

Nicholas runs the detector over the sand in front of me and I concentrate on rooting my luck, planting it in the ground below us. He jokes with his tongue to the corner and puts the detector on my belly. It beeps and we sob a laugh.

"Are you teenage toy?"

He does it again. The sound is high and bitchy. Nicholas' laugh gives me a brain storm. I give him one of the twins' cigarettes, cover his legs with mixture and he sits on my drum to enjoy himself slowly. He is covered with scratch and onion. The clusters near his feet are well worn.

"What a pathetic, hot buggy tract," Nicholas says.

He swats at his arms and scratches at his legs. He tells me about his brother, whom he hates, and he tells me other things, but I don't listen. I watch the smooth marble pill on his chin. It bounces up for the night notes, then down.

Rain flashes on Nicholas' face. I take his hand and we run where it's dense and huddle under a family of sorrowful trees, where we can watch the water. Three tight Faint jog across, linking elbows in ponchos, their canteens uncapped to catch rain. A sweater stretches across their heads. I call for Aubrey. They turn but none are her, and behind my shoulder blades, I feel a painful buzzing, something wing-eyed and struggling. I wince and my throat rises. In my disappointment, I get dry bones. The mottled cotton strains above us and lightning quietly flickers. Old women in jean shorts run down the beach. They toss their shovels and nurse their nets up to their chests as they dolphin through waves. They swim and laugh and dive again, lifting fat nets of pissy eels high above their heads. The beach sprouts their dirty buckets.

Nicholas continues to whisper secrets about his brother in my ear, things he'd like to not think but can't help. He knew when his brother was born that he was only a casing, a joke, a rot, or something. He cheated at simple games. Nicholas tells me that because of his brother, among many other things, he is afraid...of cars that go a hundred miles an hour, things that fly, etc. He is afraid that one day he will scream out in a very public place the names of those he hates and why.

“What do you think?”

“You need Young Man’s Pepper,” I say. “It must be strap-shaped and prominently veined.” My hair is drenched and I arrange it as a spinster’s bouffant. “Wait,” I say, and Nicholas freezes. “I smell perfume.”

Nicholas gives me a ride on his shoulders and we follow the scent’s trail. Up here, the view is better and brighter and the color of lemon meringue. I can see more and higher—for instance, water breaking at the pressure of silver fish. They are hungry and choked. I enjoy this man, Nicholas, best when we are not face-to-face. I enjoy catching a ride when I can be accompanied by only my thoughts, the thoughts I choose. And I know it’s important to have choice.

“This way,” I shout and point in the direction of the van.

Soon, I’ll choose a thing to wear. I’ll tie my tits and crotch with shoestring. I’ll make a paste for my pits and I’ll nap on top of someone’s important things. By the time I finish sleeping, the person with the things will forget that those things were ever theirs to begin with, and by the laws of nature, they’ll belong to me. I’ll bury 10 soda crackers at the roots of a decaying tree for all of this kindness, for Nicholas, for Aubrey, and of course, for me. It’ll happen exactly like this. I will anticipate everything, nothing escapes me. I am never tired of it, the beautiful things. The seashell-shaped flower petals scattered across our threshold—I see those. I choose those, too.

SIX

In the rotten house my eyes inched close and my voice never carried. Glad left thinkers with shredded wings vibrating on the carpet. I made her breathless and she hid under the house, beneath the foundation that rained down on her head, despising every hair for two whole nights. I had one leg so strong, the other weak, but I could still stomp hard along the kitchen, throw myself off a tall shelf so she'd remember where I am, right above. Down there, we found a carmine cloak, dusty and wrapped in newspapers. We wore it to play Dead Man with butter knives and canned mustard.

In my earliest memory, Glad read a book to me, chased me until I heard it again, and forced me to read it myself, long before I wanted, and this all happened in the late hours, also beneath the house, or on its top, or in the sheets. The book was about two snowmen who became great friends. One was tall, with four snow mounds, the other squat and three, and this one I now believe looked a bit like Charlie G., roaming around and shaking hands, but skipping me and Glad. He had teeth too small, bits of glass, and all of his appendages were perfect circles. Anyway, the snowmen spent all of their days planted beside each other, talking and sharing secrets and great ideas with the snowbirds, packed on top of sheeted ice and the dead insects. Their middles would get blown away by solid ice and bursts of new, furious storms, but they didn't seem mind. As the winter progressed, their middles built back out and skinnied, and they were full of themselves. The snowmen loved it like this, every day, every minute, wrapped in cold cotton blankets. They thought the afternoons and late nights would never finish. The way I remember it is that they were created on different days so one of them surely knew what it was like to find a self standing and firm and capable, but no one there to witness,

and then, as soon as the loneliness seemed unbearable, I imagine he discovered another hasty, perfect creation, so the next life could swell with his and the dust of freefall—that's feeling! And that new snowman would look around to find himself in great care and company, as it always seems when the knowing is especially sweet, that one can only remember the world with the other in it. Eventually, the ground heats and the snowmen begin to melt, slowly, and thankfully, at the exact time, their melt mixing in one large puddle.

SEVEN

I can hear Glad outside the van; I coil in the dish. Glad doesn't care that her voice carries. Gabriel is back and dragging tools to our door, where they'll stay for a week, disappear one morning, and then he'll return, holding his shovel, asking if we need a bit, a help, a hand.

Glad tells him he's got crotch rot.

"I smell the beetle bomb from here," she says.

Glad and I have divided our van with a marbled curtain, a thin slice of ham. I sit on my side only, on my pillow. Through the fabric I can often hear my sister tuck herself in on top of Rex, who wheezes and grunts. His smells seep through our partition. It's canned kippers in the morning. I put canned pears in a saucer and dust them with Splenda. The crystals form a soft jacket of snow.

A woman on the radio asks an eight-year-old boy questions: "Do you feel as brave as people say you are?"

He says she was kidnapped, but escaped, and wrote a book with his mother about it.

"Gabriel, do you want to see what happened to my leg?" Glad says.

Gabriel does. Glad will have her leg thrust up and over her head for Gabriel. She can hold it there for a full, marvelous hour. She can put her body in one straight line, and Gabriel will see her piece of coiled landscape between the thighs, which she precisely prunes with small sewing scissors.

She's a hisser. She's a great laugh, my sister, and Gabriel's a tit.

"It's a luxury," Glad says. "Can you afford it?"

"I'm competitive," says Gabriel.

The kid on the radio interrupts. "Hey," he says. "I actually have a question for you."

"Oh, do you?" the woman says.

"What would you do if you needed to protect yourself from a bad man?"

The woman says, "Well, I don't know." She pauses and you can hear the spit work her mouth.

"You know, that's a really good question, and I don't think I have a good answer for you.

I really don't know what I would do. I don't think I could be as brave as you."

The boy doesn't disagree.

"You ask great questions," she says. "You should probably have my job."

The boy doesn't disagree with that either, and outside, Gabriel and Glad get buggy and hungry and thirst on each other.

"You need help?" says Gabriel.

"Yes." They make the sounds of hard candy.

"Did you bring a spade?"

"No."

"Can you bite?"

"Yes."

An inhale. And a chew.

Glad wants to lie in bed and no one could love her more. In marriage you're re-born, Glad tells me. She can see herself marrying Rex. Or the fisherman from Israel with long

sideburns. Or the soldier who had bad luck and a pair of real leather loafers we filled with drink. Then there was the teller and the cleaner and cowboy with buckshot in his shoulder. Son and the dynamite he stole. Tangle Tim promised a box of 12 shiny donuts. There's George and backtrading at Lover's Nest and Marcus who can run a bulldozer. I can see myself marrying everyone at once or no one at all; I am content with my birth, or the feeling I have of it. This must be our big difference. Glad asks if I believe Rex will present a little family and straightened clothes. Could he present a marriage?

"How?" I say.

"A carpet," she says. "A beautiful one."

I cannot see Rex on a beautiful carpet. I do not believe Rex likes soft things or the color marigold. Glad says James wants to enjoy me, but James stares at his own feet as he wrenches his own sprout in the dark part of the woods. But I can see. This is what James enjoys.

I sit in the van to listen to the radio two knocks louder. I try to conserve and let it hum on certain days for short, certain hours, for the sermons on Sunday mornings. I want to know how many people are kneeling and what family members are taking part in the holy baptism, and when the preacher walks around to bless the congregation with hands on heads, I want to know about that, too.

Our van perches on its own rusty web. Things in the van don't belong in one spot or the next. We let everything have its own need and position. We have a mirror that's flawed but shows us enough of ourselves, stretched out along the middle. Sometimes it's across the dashboard so we can see everything, and on those occasions, James, Rex, all of us, become more of ourselves—the most. Rex gets posey. James scowls. Sometimes it's tucked away in the back and we and the van get smaller, etc.

When our things fall in hard to reach cracks, we leave them there—fishing lures, jelly jars, a bell that says, MEMPHIS. The twins have brought us wallets, jewelry, beach towels, shining silver, and pocket knives. And then a new layer builds—twisted blankets and net. The first layer settles. Tiny plants and animals that lived in warm prehistoric seas, died and decayed, buried in the sea bed of our home. We protect this layer, it's the settled sediments that become porous rock. And the tiny plants and animals gradually turn. Our home is our fountain. We sit here and ripen. Books live in the passenger's seat. Food hangs in nets. James sleeps outside. Rex inside. We keep a bucket near the door for night shitting. Wood is underneath. Algae, up above, dried and adhered in seven to ten layers on the scorched roof.

Anyway, Glad bangs on the side: “You ready?” She has a chair and pinestraw crowned in the band of her hat. Bites cover her belly and a small bottle is falling from her bikini string.

We shuffle to the water at the wrong time. My sister has a sharp but brittle mind. It breaks off and she also forgets. From here, the bridge towers read: TRAMP TRAMP TRAMP. The sun is out hard, and Glad places a swath of tasseled fabric over her face. I don't know what happens underneath, except that she can stay still and quiet for such a long time. I rub gently on my jaw which is swollen with sweet. We're packed. Look at the people. I peel fun knobs from the cooler and scale two fish to move my hands. The dozen or so are long dead but one has managed to make it and make racket. It flops side to side. Glad kicks the cooler. "Quiet down," she says. They do.

Aubrey sees us before we see her. She cups her hands to call and shifts toward us. A faint on our beach, in the angriest part of the afternoon. She yodels our names. She stretches a towel and lets her veiny feet wrestle. Glad stiffens, but I know she feels like I do.

"Is it genuine?" I ask and point to Aubrey's bracelet. She puts her wrist in front of us and I take it in my hands. A purple and pink jewel squeeze in its center. Aubrey fans herself and then fans herself again.

"You have to bite it," she says. "And hard, with the back teeth."

"What will happen?" I ask.

“Nothing if it’s genuine.” I bite and inspect. Nothing happens. She smiles and her mouth turns down toward the neck.

“OK?”

“Where did it come from?” Glad says.

“My ex. It’s the last thing he had to give.” From her bag she pulls out a cone of nuts roasted in syrup and she invites us. We eat fast. Glad takes Aubrey’s jug without asking and pours a little in a dirty cup.

Before The Bay, Aubrey tells us she wore brightly-colored skirt suits with hanging gold and crystal buttons, and she sold houses. She sold one for a man she loved, who owned several bars in her town.

“I could swim in his pool when and how I wanted,” she says. She fed his pugs fresh-cut deli meat.

A woman stands nearby. She pushes forward with her mouth. She and everyone else want a response. The crowd claps and chants the woman’s name: Jazz. Her hair is short as a ferret. Another woman stands and holds a funnel connected to a long, clear tube and Jazz shimmies her body to a low pounce. Her whole mouth encases the tube, and her tongue, which is pink and alive, pushes inside. A bottle of peach champagne pops

and pours and Jazz's eyes get wide and drowned when the foam trickles from the corners of her mouth. Her stomach muscles flex. Everyone cheers and so do we. Jazz rips the wet tube from her face and growls.

Aubrey whistles using two fingers. There's a gust of wind and she pretends she's in the car with the windows down and we cheer her on. It looks so real. She shakes facing the gust. She adjusts her seat. She lights an invisible cigarette. She uses the rearview to apply and rubs until it's right. A hair gets stuck to her lip and with her fingernails, she gingerly picks it away. At this, Glad claps.

Aubrey rests her head on my shoulder. I tell her she can. She gives us her old business card, to share, why not, remember me, and I know we will hang it so all can see—Aubrey's proud picture in the bottom right corner. Hers is a strong, coated neck. It could hold up anything.

EIGHT

I can admit to myself that it isn't as beautiful here, underwater, or on shore, not like it was at first, when we could only wake up at night, our heads doubled in weight, when the water was dark and the cirrus swoops of plastic were polished to smooth, glittery stones. Men wore denim vests to burn back infected trees and scrub, leaving fat black scabs along the shore. If you peel them past, it's not new life they're protecting. How do I describe what was once beautiful but, at times, which I cannot anticipate, it dawns on me, ever so briefly, that it is now something else? My mind is like a limpet broken off a rock, floating on its own, which is the beginning of a great journey, toward knowing—at least, knowing what is found beyond its favorite surface—and I do believe that there is a different kind of beauty to knowing, and I guess I believe it isn't joyous to remain ignorant, and things can be more beautiful when left to turn in the enzymes of the underbelly, and perhaps the way I once felt about knowing—afraid, more or less—is an example of the great misunderstanding that rests between the knowers and the dumb. What I mean is, I now stand as testimony that the ignorant are aware, if only by dog sense, that there is an open gash they cannot fill, that there is something missing in the first place, and imagine how frightening that must be, as another example, to see a perfectly formed hole, and not know what will fit its specific shape. The ignorant are shaken by their nameless dreams. Next time, ask the ignorant if they would rather stay in their own homes and never leave. They'll say yes. They'll say thank you.

I now know many things about this place, where the winds blow, our shore and its sister shore, where the colonies of shrimp have their homes, and the caves of family upon family. I know the mud gunks between rock and sand, the effeminate fish that feed off

wet-faced rocks, the gelatin that bubbles from dried kelp. I lick and chew until it's soft enough to swallow. What's beautiful is the way I know I can still feel the sun down here, and I can see through the burns to my open eyes. What I have ruled out as beautiful, but then discovered I was wrong, is yet another list to make.

I dump fish and mussels in the cooler. I bite hard and fast on the small seeds I pick from between their scales and spit them out fast as bullets. It is finally a temperature we can handle, so we've emerged. Glad wears a gifted dress that makes her look like a black and white hourglass emptying itself of treasured sand.

"Do you like it?"

I use my pointer and thumb to give a painful whistle.

"I like when we walk to the center, and the Faint get confused and embarrassed."

When Glad leans, the old ones look at her. When she turns another way, they turn to look that way, too.

"They are anxious for us," I say.

"Yes, Faith. That's it. I feel as if I could do 1,000 tricks and do them very well."

Glad paints a picture of a serpent and a swan on my bare back using mud and jelly. In a mood like this, she titters around the beach and the van. She's an elf mending. She knows the names of things and smells like strong coffee. I spit and get violet and we both stare at the color in awe.

"I want that everywhere," I say.

"Yes," she says. "You would look gorgeous good like that."

Glad has an idea. She has ten ideas and falls in the sand trying to get them out. What's in her mouth? She's tonguing a green army man. She takes it out and unfurls a flag of surprising breath. I put my hand to my nose and she giggles.

"Pow, pow," she says. She can't remember what she had to say, which frustrates me, endlessly, because I want to hear it, so I pinch her twice.

"Now," I say. "Glad." I like to say her name like that, as if she were stuck far away, in outer space. She closes her eyes to think.

"Now." Glad re-deals her cards. The eyeballs under her lids dart side to side.

What does she see? She has a devil in her spout. I let her get up and that's that and we won't return to it. The storm on the horizon hisses. I shake the cooler and there's a puff

of spoiled summer—of Glad, Rex, James. A party boat honks, speeding through, girls upside down and leaning over the back railing, and others hold them by the knees. Insects begin to sing as if the song is poked from their bellies.

We arrive when we hear a song. We are ready for it. Tonight, I hoped, and here we are. We willed the Faint and their fumes of rum. We wait for Aubrey and nuzzle into her tobacco underarms. She gives me a tiger print purse. I immediately open and shake it but nothing falls.

“It’s your gift,” she says. “Look nice.”

I take her hand and kiss the most elegant finger. Aubrey’s face is especially shiny and tart in the fire’s glow. She drew no eyebrows, and it’s shocking. She’s shocked. I’m shocked. Glad throws in a red plastic bottle and the fire shimmers and a few Faint gather. She throws in a blue one. I shake a can full of fishhooks for my proper attention. Aubrey wanders. Her neck is goosed and distracted. The shifty cotton top falls and exposes the puckered stars across her chest. She palms a stone for throwing. She wears scarves wrapped around her head, and I wish she would give me one of those. I throw down the tiger purse and point to the bruises Glad leaves me to make her laugh, but she slumps and walks like a Mack truck. The others make an unaware path for her with their bodies. I tell her about a picnic on the hollow log and looking for rusted pipes in the shallows, things I know she likes, but she sits alone and has no canteen, no dress, no

food, or party to join. Her eyes are dull and gummy. I make a motion of friendship and she looks away.

“I don’t want to die.” Aubrey screams this into her hand. Into her shirt, “I don’t want to be a floating body, pickled in a sucky swamp.”

She address me: “I don’t want my skin to turn soft and drape off my smelly meat and bones. I don’t want to make a yellow cloud of sick. I don’t want to lie waiting full of rats. I don’t want to be so silent and still that I can be mistaken for a piece of scenery. I don’t want to get stepped on or forgotten. I don’t want to be left and unlooked for, behind a tree, under a rock, broken in someone’s garage, buried in black trash bags. I don’t want my clothes to fade. I don’t want my face to fray or my fingernails to grow long and jagged down my thighs.”

Glad soaks a rag in cooler water. It smells of fish and sulphur. She wraps it around clusters of blemished root and puts it in Aubrey’s armpits and Aubrey, dazed, sings a song to a few feeble women nearby, and they all know all of the words, and repeat them back, feelingly: “He wants me, he wants me, he ain’t gonna get me.”

I am surprised that in all her living, Aubrey has never learned of the time of the forgotten spell. What is always unseen. What sticks to the insides of our noses, the creases of our toes, the life after death, the slick of the slug, you could say, the milk of the fang, the bruise of the cheek. One day, we all get to crawl home.

I walk to the fire to pick out blistered shrimp for Aubrey. Crouching, I rip them into bite-sized chunks for her and squeeze the brine from a handful of kelp. The fruits will surprise her by continuing to ripen in her gut. I can feed her if she's too weak, I think. It won't be gross because it will be kind to let her lick the juice from each of my fingers. Severed urchins grow together and become alive again as one heterogenous creature, if they must. The cramp fish wriggle as I cut it into slivers. I look down at the water and it is, again, so still. More than water, it is mirror, which I do not expect, which I have maybe never seen: so much mirror. I stop for a moment to look at myself and I'm surprised. I feel even more enthusiasm for the way my cheeks rise and fall, the bleeding heart of my lips. Sometimes it's this way when I see an old photo of myself and notice, for a moment, anew, what someone might see if or when they felt love for me, not an accumulative love that comes from obligation or the price of return, but pure desire. I see me and think, I want more from you. It throws me back to feel a love this shocking, this illicit. I nearly want to eat me, lick inside the dimples of my own two cheeks, but I won't. Instead, I will spread myself so thin that others can have me, too.

“Speed it up.”

The canoe is pulled to the water's edge. Aubrey tilts back her head to swallow my knot of food and shudders. I can watch its path down her throat. A young one has his mouth open like an animal that uses its tongue to hear or sense danger, and he hands out lights. Aubrey kisses his hand when it reaches her.

“Aubrey will land on an island with a creeping evergreen,” Glad says. I listen closely and I am patient. “Sweet deer berries. A sunny situation.” She touches me on the ear.

There is a code if you can find it. Before someone dies, they ask to be wise, and they receive a new laugh. A small bead is placed in the throat and the laugh must push around it, behind and beside. The laugh can come from ancestors or enemies, but if the laugh comes from an enemy, the near dead will get a pained expression in their eyes and they'll try to hide this from you, the viewer, so you don't see them, how they dart and roll. This is what I know of dying.

Our grandmother stopped leaving the house when a stranger's enemy became part of her. This is how I know what I know. Our grandmother received a ride home and on the way, she and the driver discovered a flipped car, teenagers tumbling out of it. Our grandmother's driver left the car running and went to a young boy sprawled in the road and began blowing in his lips, gripping his face, and blowing. Our grandmother began to pray in song, any lyric she could remember. The driver looked up at her and his mouth and face were encircled in the boy's red blood. When he returned to the car, he was shaken, visibly upset. He told her that the boy laughed right before he died and it was odd, the most disturbing thing he had ever heard. The driver began to cry and said that he believes the boy laughed...at him. He asked her if she believed him and our grandmother laughed, too, at the man, in his face, the very laugh that was not her own but the one that had entered her vis-à-vis another spirit.

We've known several people to go from living to dead. I think of my somewhere father as Olaf III Haraldsson of Norway now, with a skinny nose, a crown with rubies, in a cold, wooden home, warmed with pie. My mother is there on a bear rug. When our grandmother died, we gained a world. I think of our grandmother in her worst shoes. A stool. Nothing to milk, in the middle of a far away field, all alone.

We are deep in our own minds when Aubrey sails eastward. "Glad?" I say. "Is that all?"

We hear nothing. We wait for something, a show, a word, a mind. Aubrey takes off a red scarf and waves it back and forth, and while I feel disappointed by this, I also believe that it's simple things, ordinary acts and nights that make a noble mind and soul. Aubrey reaches the middle of The Bay and disappears.

In the middle of The Bay, at the bottom of the pit, you'll find houses soft as sauce. In the middle of the houses, you'll find a common room, where a family once cooked or washed or screamed. In the middle of the room, you'll find assembled small fish. In the middle of the thousands of clustered fish, you'll find teathy things with toes and joints. But this is not the order. There is mobility among everything: the house can be brushed away. The fish can float to the surface. Aubrey can sink or dissolve or fall asleep and recreate the system in her dreams with all of the howling elements.

NINE

Between the ground and the underground, there's stone tails, worried into diamond rings. Valuables can't be reached. Between the tongue and throat, there's the red sick. Our grandmother lost all taste on the top of her tongue and squirreled food underneath. She put sugared almonds in her Coca-Cola. She soaked spoiled fruits in gin. She sucked them loud. Her lips had extra dried pieces. She pushed forward with the left hip, then the right. One hip at a time through the doorway.

"You could go to the school for beauticians. It's all under the table," she said. Her hair was cut like a little Dutch girl, even her eyebrows were salt and pepper. Her nightgown was old shirts. Ours, other things. One night mine caught fire as Glad cut bangs for me in small angles, thin across my forehead, and tossed the little hairs to crisp in the light. I leaned back, I think, to laugh at something, or me, the face of Faith, looking back at me in the reflection of Glad's eye.

I felt the overwhelm of heat. My back was made of glass. Glad pushed me off the hearth and to the ground while our grandmother watched. She's shocked, I thought, and so am I. I am shocked to be a girl turned into a girl wick—a pretty orange, writhing lamp that's growing and spreading. Beautiful things can be small but they can't be small forever. They distribute themselves to what they touch and, as they give, they grow. In our grandmother's face and in her eyes, there was a blankness, and in the days after, I believed it was a look of dispassion, a look of no love to give.

But now I can see our grandmother's face much more clearly. I can see all of this underneath my eyelids. Her freedom would also mean loneliness, and it must have been overwhelming, I think, to make a fast and simple choice.

Glad whacked me clean with couch cushions. She cried and stroked the back of my sizzled head. Our grandmother watched. Drool fell from her unmarried mouth. The mouth is the world, the world is in shamy shambles.

I see our grandmother in a dream, shuffling in sandals outside the van. She's bald, the follicles open and shut. She's part of the vast system, another part of tall grass. A shining curve. She looks free. "Imagine my journey," she says to me, or something like it. "What it takes to get to you at night." Her forehead is shiny with sweat and moon. "I am coming from a place where I am celebrated."

My grandmother, who is actually covered in ivy, her own hard bark, eyelids peeled and pecked. "I travel by bobbing through a river," she says. "Do you know what that's like?" She wears Aubrey's scarves. She peers in the van's window where Glad and Rex are asleep.

"Have you spent the night as a dark-brown deer?" she asks. She tries to open the door. Rusty and fixed. I can bring her back in an instant.

TEN

Wait until sweet fern hits maturity. I know this with a lick to its underside. If I can't taste distant sugars, I make an incision in the stem, not bigger than the eye of a needle and bleed. One drop should be viscous and chocolate, but no more than three, or the stem will paunch. What I like is to lick the right crevice and fish cooked for only a second, and then we pass the blue milk—sip, sip. And that I have an appearance to match the temperature of the soul, and that's the big thing. I think about happening into something better, nicer, a fancier relationship to the world, and the more I think about this, the more it feels true.

Long live it, The Bay.

Glad wants to watch me. She wants to sit on a tree limb and watch me eat a lunch. I try to teach a game to children. A mother lets me hold her polished baby and kiss the brown butter on the underside of its feet. The baby tightens its body; the baby wants to get dropped, but I hold tighter. I want to kiss it, but my lips are so strong. It moves its body around like a caterpillar. I like the way it feels, its empty soul, a baby in its baby clothes.

“How does it feel?” Glad wants to know.

It strikes me that it's possible she hasn't touched a baby, not as she is, as a woman. I've always believed that Glad has done everything there is to do and that's why she likes to watch me, so she can watch someone else doing for the first time and store all my clean pleasures in her mind for herself.

I tell her that feeling babies on the outside must be a little like feeling them on the inside, and inside a baby is a baby's stem and they reach for and hold onto it and try it with their unfound teeth. Their limbs go out every way.

"Show me," Glad says.

And I get on the ground and show her, using my ribs and groin to move across the beach. Babies have the disposition of a snot otter.

"They look boiled," Glad says.

I agree. I tell her to walk with her hands in the air. Do this for three hours and let the blood pool in the arms. Bop them with a cudgel to seal the skin tight. She knows to live under something—a roof, an umbrella, a silk scarf, a country church. And what to plant under the moon to feed the back's infections. If you eat the sweet fern's reddish-brown bark, the young hairs that grow on the first lance leaves near the root, your skin will shrink and underneath will be a fluid breeze—just like a baby. My sister shows her tongue and I anoint.

She paces. I see what's new in my sister, the red roughage along the spine and shoulders. I watch her scrub clean and juicy with porous rock. The shoulders extend longer and sharper and the archway of her forehead crosses with two painful lines. She

walks the way I imagine furniture legs would if they were made of skin. There are many questions I cannot ask my sister, especially those questions I have had about the time before the rotten house. When I have, she has either thrust three special bruises or told me a great lie—about a cottage that stood all alone in a field of fruit trees which just stood there, and about the children who traveled long distances to wrap themselves among the cool branches. I know that Glad has known no children. She is a girl of practice; she watches them from afar and repeats their laughs and dances until she has it right. She's gone, and I could yell, not at her or anything in particular. I only have a need. I do. I yell. The nearby sunners move their camps to the left and right. I'll find a sailor and rob him of his drink. But it is evening and all of the sailors have planted themselves in dim, hidden rooms with other, older sailors and their women and day's keep.

James beats on his chest. The smallest Faint, left behind, tells him not to prove it. He puts an arm around her shoulders. She is ever pale and James looks ever awful and angry. I twirl around, minding another's business. Glad will come back and have a laugh, I think. She'll see us here, James pushing up against the poor Faint, and she'll shout her own instruction: Gather a fine hair flake, do it for me, a sandwich, a tooth, a button.

“What's your first name?” He puts his head close so the Faint can whisper it.

“Mrs. Paris.” Rex hunts through her bag and finds a jar of cream, a bag of toast.

For me, James holds up a giant sucker the flavor of blueberry. I unwrap it and lick, and the woman must watch, I suppose, so I enjoy it more, so she can also taste and feel what I can. What else could she do?

The next morning Glad returns and we all play a game with the twins that involves one person hopping into the lap of the others, squatting there like a duck, and that person, with the duck in their lap, must successfully push them out and onto the ground. If they lie there long enough, they can be stomped. If they are stomped, the offensive and defensive roll is switched, If they roll out of harm’s way, do not chase them for very long. Underwater is free; the limbs of a tree are mostly free, too. A couple watches.

“Faith? Glad?” They say.

Glad stiffens. But the couple looks stone-carved and picturesque. They look sharp and inviting.

“It’s me,” I say. “It’s Faith.”

They ask us to follow. Come. They want us to see what they’ve made down the beach. There, we find sand figures in our liking—not accurate, but they do capture our essence:

Glad's forehead, my chin, and they've added on long and curly tails. The couple asks us to lie down beside the figures so they can take a picture. We do. In the picture, I have a leg over my sand self and Glad pokes a finger into her likenesses insert. They're happy and say that they can't believe it, but we can.

The couple plays our game with us. They leave a plastic bag of pastries that look like purple and glowing yellow jewels. We suck their cream and paste.

I push around the shallows and find nothing. In the deep, I fish for the two loveliest successes. I cut a small and selfish diamond around the fish's anus, saw the flippers, and let them crust. I clean and cool the face. Pat it dry. Palm its strings and boil. Add a season. Pick two, if available, and let it leach until a thin syrup remains. Spread the body and put a little effort inside. We eat, but as the fish is passed, our portions grow small. We lick our fingers and, lightly, the hot pan, so it doesn't stick. We fall fast asleep in our favorite corners of the van.

I wake up a day later and I'm swollen. Glad agrees: My connections are fluid-filled. She tends to me with a sharp fire-heated needle. She pricks in straight lines around my ankles to drain me dry. It's a letter, I think. I look closer and see that the pinpricks spell GLAD. I am always filled, filled up, up, up. The twins have shut up the van's windows with a brown, gummy varnish that won't dry. Its breeze makes me feel brilliant. What would look at us, I want to know, if the windows were not sealed?

“Oh, sorry, sorry,” Glad says. But she isn’t. She’s no longer looking and pricking around where the skin’s right and doesn’t need it. I shake her off and she throws a book. I stare at photos of mountains and their ancient animals and James fills my cup.

“Where have you been?” I ask him.

And he fills it again. Glad makes incisions and James keeps my cup overflowing. Glad tells the twins to leave so we have more air. They don’t. Since the pastries, it has been so long, and my needs aren’t met. My arms are soft and incapable. Rex has a quilt helpless across his shoulders. He’s dripping and so is Glad, but still amazed by the smell.

“We’re in the fire,” Rex says.

“A what,” says Glad, “...a what do you aspire?”

Rex laughs, and this makes Glad laugh. She makes a poke that feels wrong again and I pee a little.

“Glad!” I say. She laughs, and so does Rex, and I laugh, too.

“To have slept for all these years,” Rex says.

“Tears and beers?” Glad says. “Your fears?”

They sob a laugh, pushing each other on. From the stoppage of her shorts, I can see that it's her limited week. She's humid and growing dark rust between the legs. Rex spins her around and pins her to floor and her laugh is high and plastic. He's in his devildom.

My connections are weepy and covered in a thin-red film, the ankles no good. They need a cold weight, or an exertion. I scoot to the door with my feet lifted and purple. I open it and let my body roll to the ground. The new air punches the side of my head and I feel dizzy. The sun is clear, for a season like ours, it could be any hour, should anyone want to know. I wish I had something delicious and right now and for my mouth, and I wish I had a hand to drag me to the water's edge. There was a truffle once, pressed with gold paper, and a sweet whole berry within. It was good. I remember the Faint who brought it, the young man with an uncontrolled tongue, a fleshy hood descending from his ear like a gorgeous chandelier, twined and tangled arms of growth. He hid his face with a shoulder and talked that way, looking in another direction.

I am exposed. I am inside out. I drag myself further. I think, Help. I think, If you would, help, I can't get cool. I can't keep one thing for long in my mind. The boy with the growth shudders and shimmers and is sucked into the middle of a water spout.

Have I felt like this before?

I spot a wet heap I could suck to cool the fire of my mouth and gut and I pull myself toward it. The swell around my ankles shrivels before my eyes and I vomit small white rice. From the heap shines two hands, two feet, a nose and mouth. Or is it the effect? In our grandmother's pasture, when we rolled from the windows for one, two hours at a time, we drug our bodies like this, hard work and very secret, across the floury dirt until we reached the creek and were well out of sight, and could no longer be seen from the watching window.

I touch and squeeze. The wetness squirms; Aubrey smiles and winks.

ELEVEN

I fill her hands and she fills her face. Algae glosses down Aubrey's lips, chin, and neck. She is only half awake, yet she sucks and pulls with her cramped cheeks; she falls asleep for days and more full days. We fill these by filling ourselves. I have a stone cup for this very purpose and it brims with small chatters of life I might miss if I weren't so still, so patient. My joints are unhealed, stupid. They buckle under my weight, so I scoot where I'm needed. I let the sun warm the red and brown water to equal temperatures and open my throat to take them down in one heavy slick. I feed myself and then others, the largest birds who drop purple paint down the sides of our van, and their swamp babies in waiting, hurrying hither and thither in their rink of nest.

Cook, cook, cook, is their signal of familiarity.

Listen for their clinking beaks. Watch them hide behind a handsome plant. A breeze, a ripple. The mother dips into shrimp, and again, I find my way to the water's edge. Like her, I put my face under for the shrimp's crackle and wait for their sparkly whispers. I watch a fast dance between an oyster and a clam. Beneath the surface is a new day and I feel peaceful for a small while. For fun, I fill with fresh chance.

"Faith!"

I limp to the van. Glad's on the ground outside, her bare breasts bouncing as she laughs, Rex's hand moving down toward her zipper. James brings the fire closer to Aubrey's rest. Someone has markered on eyebrows. Her mouth is open and with one finger, I urge

it shut. The tongue gives her trouble; she gums the meatball, so I flick her one, two, three times. She whines. She stops. Glad has already found something new, on top of the van, watching us upside down.

“Is she cold?” James strikes a match and waves the flame in Aubrey’s direction.

“It’s hot,” I say.

“She shivers,” he says. He lights kindling and blows. Aubrey wakes, and her mouth has been emptied of the new teeth we made and placed on her sore, dead gums. She’s susceptible and licking a lip wound. She tells us she needs money and James finds a single coin for her, which she can’t hold. “That’s it. That’s all I’ve got pudding pop.”

“What did you dream?” I ask. She looks confused. I can barely look at her eye, which is dark and bearded with sand and gunk, because I’m afraid of the ways in which she has changed. Sweat hangs from her forehead and she moans.

“What did you dream?” She closes her eyes for more sleep, and I fashion a skirt from a pink leopard towel. I attend her with light of all kinds. I push her body directly into the sun, then to the underside of a dense canopy. I put my body on top of hers, as much I as I can cover, and at this, she screams. I want her to have the sense that there are things she can look forward to, that there is nothing to be afraid of, and most importantly, that there is nothing to hide.

Where are we, she wants to know. The twins dig a pit at my request and I gently request her inside, and this excites them, the twins. They love a good project, not to mention, there is nothing quite like the light of finely divided rock. It sifts through my fingers and I think of a mouth filled with smooth, gold beads. They begin to shovel with their fingers and scoops of trash. They cover her with a thin layer of sand. Rex stops to pick a bug needling toward his nose and smears the blood.

So, there she is, evaporating, and her struggling body is delicately handled and covered, and a dinner plate of lips and sockets is exposed. She squirms. I fight the twins for her face, although with her teeth gone, the face has changed drastically, down in the mouth.

“How do I look?”

I get bitter, yet I tell her very good.

“Why did you come back?”

“I didn’t. I was dropped on this shore.” I squat close and pull some stuffing from my ear.

She looks as if she’ll cry. “I was refused,” she says. “Unwanted.”

“I heard there was an island,” she says. She squints and I strain for her new voice. “And I heard that the island contained an old mansion and that inside the mansion I’d find a cellar stocked with everything I could want for one week, or more, of living. Of final living, so, good living; that’s what they said. I heard everything I could possibly want to know about what awaited me, and in such vivid detail that I knew which rooms had drafts, which didn’t, which curtains let the sunlight cook the brick floor until it scalded feet. I knew what to avoid and what to look for. There would be an orange tree which produced small, hard fruit, but it would be enough, I was told, to get the suggestion, which is what this place promised, what the people I met continued to promise, I should say, a suggestion of comfort. And there would be a fresh towel and soap and tea and what more could I need? I could live on small cares like that, I think—a breakfast with brandy. I need very little and it is by very little that I am still alive. But my boat rocked well past where the island should have been, yet I kept faith, as I had nothing left at that point, and I believed that the mistake could lead me toward something else, something better. Anyway, I fell asleep. You’re probably wondering how I could fall asleep in a place and in such a state as this one. I tell you that I think my body was collapsing, and it still is, and although it’s imminent, the collapse has been delayed, if only slightly. As the boat blew forward, I must have been lulled into a trance so deep that I slept with both eyes open. I know this because I awoke with the pains of scissors behind them. I woke up with my mind ringing. Sounds. Clinking battle swords. Although I could hardly see what caused the sounds, and what was all around me, through the icicles trapped in both puffy eyes. My boat was stopped, clanging into hulls, and young people were there, holding dim lanterns, seamen with dogs standing straight up, all of them dressed better

than me, if you believe it, and at first I was afraid, horrified, and I told them—the young, frightening people, ‘I am going to die, but not like this.’ And one of the boys found this funny and laughed, while another became insulted and said, ‘Shut the fuck up, you don’t know what you’re talking about.’ I had nothing to offer them. No money. No tinned dinner or dessert. As my eyes adjusted to their shapes and voices and their features registered more clearly, I recognized them. I know you! I thought but did not say out loud. I know you. Of course, I know you. My god, you are my children. And once I knew this, I became even more afraid. They asked who I was, for my name, and at the time, while I know it sounds odd, I couldn’t remember that either. Luckily! My own name! But I reached my hand around my body and knew it was still me, the me, me. I told them, ‘I have experiences!’ I knew that much, and so I told them so. ‘And I am deep,’ I said. I am embarrassed to say it now to you, that that’s what I said, but it’s the truth, and everything I am telling you is the truth here. And to that, the humorous boy, my boy, said something smart like, ‘Deep as shit.’ Mocking, not humorous, now that I think about it. ‘You don’t have any call to talk like that,’ I said. His teeth pointed in opposite directions and I said so and repeated, ‘No call to talk to me like that at all. I am the age of your mother,’ and as soon as I said it, I knew I probably should not have. I did not want this boy to understand what I understood. I had enough wits about me to remember that it is crucial, if not the most important thing in life, to accurately assess what those around you are capable of, at any given time. And accuracy! There are five or six keys to life and this is one. I’m a foolish old woman, and if I wasn’t aware of it before—and I think I was—I became aware of it then. How old is this boy? Could he be my birthed? Generally, when it comes to age, I’m pretty good. I can usually determine an

age with only an elbow, but this was harder. Here before me was a boy's body but the wrinkles of a man. Is my son this age? I looked at the other, unspeaking boy. Is my other son that age? And the girl. And behind them was another. One more. One more. Did I have this many children? This happens at a point in one's life. You start to question things, like where were you during these five years, where did you live, who did you love, and how did you spend one day. Truly, you'll find that you won't be able to recollect one day's activity from a ten year span. Did you do anything at all? And if you can't answer that, who knows who you were to other people. You realize then that one small imperceptible shift could have thrust you at this young person's feet, feeding him from your own motherly leaks, then shoving bread at him, shoving it down his gullet when he refuses, or buying a stuffed gorilla, or sending him to the cemetery with a plastic rose for his favorite name, calling him sweet names—think, all kinds of syrups, washing him, sitting on him by accident, and then we could've cried together. Both of us unable to forgive me. You'll understand this one day, to feel like maybe when you were sleeping, you gave birth to all of the scoundrels around you, which is probably why you hate them so much—this is the most truth, the hate that can be shaved off the birthed by the birther. My birthed, I might have said something like this to the boy as he stood above me, as my mind began to fire in several directions at once. In one of those directions was a fat, green bird and the fat green bird's friend, a parakeet with pepper markings across its breast, everyone, come to find, had such markings, twinkles, kisses, tattooed or adhered—they took me up and onto their boat, which contained a little room that looked a lot like an apartment we once rented on the 52nd floor of a tall building, the only tall building like it in our city. The wind ripped around the apartment, and we could feel the

sway of strong storms, which scared all of us—me and the kids—we were so scared we couldn't open the blinds. In that room, with the angry sound of weather, I laid on a bale of hay. I was so hungry and I was given nothing to eat.

“Were they?” I say.

“Were they what?”

“Your children.” My voice pitched. “Were they?”

“I suppose.”

I nodded. I did, too. Aubrey's like Glad in that she's overgrown. Everything that's dead comes to life around the two of them. They talk with food in their cheeks and everyone asks them if they have anything more they'd like to say. The grass gets plush, anemones open themselves, lovers spread their legs, the drift wood breaks its aromatic crust like fresh-baked bread.

Aubrey shifts and groans. I wait for more, but she's finished.

“Do you want something for it?” I ask when it doesn't come. I want to see her appreciate me crouching on sand, but I see it never come across her mind.

Hair on Aubrey's head thins and thickens unevenly. She squints and puckers. Her splotched skin peels in wet sand across the chest. She touches herself. She touches missing eyebrows.

“What?” she says.

The dense mixture spreads as plaster down her scaled legs. I imagine her as a statue, and here I am, the nameless artist building her cast.

“Let it sit,” I say.

She sniffs and shakes. Her sad arms and belly go heavy. I rest a saucer of sauce near her legs.

“This will liven blood flow,” I say.

She doesn't answer. She looks down at the sauce but doesn't answer. I tell her she doesn't have to worry. She can wait, and in the meantime, she should cover her chest with algae and let it crisp in the sun. Once it's the texture of a cracker, it's ready to eat. I stuff a handful in my mouth to show.

“See?”

“Excuse me,” she says. “A smoke?”

“No.”

I place the algae strips and she shivers at the cool. The scratches near her pits are doubled.

“There,” I say. She doesn’t respond.

“There,” I say.

I fetch a wet rag, but instead of her face, she uses it to wash off her mixture and screams in surprise and genuine pain.

“The red puffiness surrounding your ankles is the process,” I explain.

I describe what the oil of Dutchman’s Pipe would do for her skin now, and most importantly, what it would do later. She touches and winces. She looks like a molting crab, trembling for its new-grown tender hide. That helpless heart, waiting for new shelter around its limbs. She scratches more, and I tell her the skin needs its own breath.

She settles back into her feeble position, arms crossed over her gut. She stares at me with seedtick eyes, blinks with her whole face. This is one unfortunate thing about her. I fetch a blanket from the van. She lets her head fall on the heap.

I want to feed her again, and I ask, "May I?"

I put two greasy lumps of fish on both of her cheeks which inspires her rabbit nose.

"Itch" she says.

I oblige. I itch all over her face and behind the ears. A few honey bees swarm. I have James' knife with the rough handle to make another thin sheet. Transparent and opal and dressy. I put them over her, over her closed eyes and lips and tell her she's a genie in a lamp, and she likes this, which again proves that the old Aubrey can be shucked with repeated action and deliberate tasks. I find new light. An apple blossom floats from her mouth.

I uncover her and Glad joins. She's sullen. I notice along Aubrey's ankles the mark of small nibbles.

"Stars," Glad says.

Aubrey looks down at herself and stares more, longer, curiously—she wipes one finger down her forearm and skin falls with it. I'm afraid that The Bay does not seem to carry the same effects for Aubrey. She shows no gold. No long locks. No polished lips. And yet

—

Where can we take her? The bottom of the van? Its frontmost seat, strapped to its sweaty top. We could create a wall, a symmetrical pyramid and place her underneath. I smell a scent that hangs horrible. Aubrey carries the smell of someone who has been stacked with cords of others on top of others.

“Cluster eaters along her back and go for a swim,” Glad says. I think of Aubrey’s picture tacked to our ceiling, her slim shoes; I imagine them. A silk scarf, not a speck of dust.

Aubrey moans and I leave. I return with broken wood and I rub it sharp.

“Glad,” I say, “a bind.”

Aubrey twigs. It’s the sweetness and satin. Glad holds the ankle and I tie. Aubrey sucks in her own intensity. She inflates her chest and the sigh she snorts is, “Ah.”

“Ah,” I say. Aubrey gives a cry.

Once, for a full two days we escaped to our grandmother's pasture. I dug for roots, in particular, the little bugs on them. Glad and I sliced and baked them over the stones we heated with our own sparks, all the things we made, all the things that were provided by a once-locked shed. Once we had a soft pudding, we fed a stray black cat we chased into each other's arms. She was stupefied by our love. We plucked her especially. She made her bed in a tree and we scaled to the top after her. Glad made her a necklace so shiny, so handsome, it looked like liquid gold. I wrapped the kitten in paper, chewed and spit the pulp until I had a well-formed nest from which our kitten could hatch. "A name," Glad said. We'll carve it at the base of this tree. We'll never forget. With rocks we wrote:
ANAME

TWELVE

The Faint are smaller in number, but they make up for this in fanfare. Another flute. Another lemon icebox pie. Another song spit into a water jug. We send Glad to test the temperature. She stands along the perimeter inspecting her wrists, exposing her eyebright, and the Faint make no movement; they appear to have no feeling. Her lip is swollen with a second hangy that bends the light. This shows the truth. I shuffle to Glad's right side, her best side. I'm looking like a priest. I've got a robe, a little bag hangs from my neck. My legs are spread for the first night breeze, although it may never come. Glad holds my hand and we walk. We make a trail right through the Faint and to the other side. Shuffle. A Five Alive candy bar waves across a man's lips. He has enjoyed; he continues to enjoy. I spy the tiger purse Aubrey gave me beneath his butt. He scoots closer to his neighbor and gazes in another direction, away. I recognize a woman, her painted hair. She brings the most commotion. I extend my hand, which she doesn't take. I kneel at her blanket and she asks what I want.

"Company," I say.

"I have none to give," she says.

"A drop," I say, "the smallest taste." I touch the cold of her green bottle. She grabs. It slips and wets the sand.

"Look," she talks with another voice and throws a splash across the cup I clutch.

“There.” She waves me away.

Glad finds a chair shaped log. A man finds the hem of my skirt.

“That’s mine,” he says. “My tablecloth.” I tuck it tight. He rips and I’m left with little or nothing.

I can’t see the twins, but I can feel them, and while I often wish they would fall in a deep crack, climb the dead bridge and slip, or become distracted running in the opposite direction, forgetting us completely, I am at this moment filled by knowing that we are greater than two. Three, four, plus Aubrey, there’s five.

“As if it is theirs,” Glad says, “the whole beach.”

A star of great density hangs above us. A witness. A goading. Glad enters their crowd once more as their whispers thicken and their private circles fill tighter, nothing like those nights we spent—our cooks wafting from Aubrey’s fire, and perhaps it was also Aubrey who could make the Faint appear strong, like beautiful elves, or pilgrims to worship, and not who they are, narrowly leaving their dismal caves. Perhaps through Aubrey we saw them as they could be and now they appear as they are; the cruel are Mr. and Mrs. Right There. A dog howls with laughter. I feel it in my earth-filled gut. Glad appeals to a Faint with a horse’s face, and while I can’t understand their words, I know the click clack of the head cock, the point and proud jaw. I look up to the sky and hope

that there will be something. There have been nights when I have grown dizzy from witnessing all that's in the night sky. I hope for a comet dragging millions of miles through space, a constellation in war, a prop plane's busy signal; but excluding the single spotlight, clouds choke.

No moon. This is our fortune.

Near me there's a rough, hairy love growing thick with inflated leaves. I pull it up, roots and all, uncaring, unamused. I feel like the glossy blackbirds with bright, red thighs who grow tired of their mates mid-summer and scream out exceedingly bitter snarks, hateful pecks rushing them out of the warm nest, once welcome. I take off my bottom so I'm naked as a tree. Glad shakes her shoulders in approval. The Faint, who prefer to cover their mysteries, spit and drool. Oh. No.

Glad returns empty and we walk to the water's edge together. I hesitate, as I never have, while Glad goes deep. We wade and push as the Faint rustle up their next float, as a speech is made and prayers requested. I do not smooth into the salt.

I feel a dig in my chest. I lift the plant to my mouth and eat from its heart. I don't see them and get ripped by cursed thistles. I pluck them from the corners of my mouth and taste copper. It's a bitter dose, but I take it, what's left, I take it. I save a little for Aubrey. We will need her, and I tell Glad as much. We will need her to walk by her own will for her to smile and for the air around her to lose its nauseous taste. I'll need gagroot, five

ropes, eight small and bony nutlets, a hot soup of worm remedy—the vine that comes with whitish veins. We'll set her upright and watch her get reborn on a fibrous stalk, among inconspicuous flowers. We'll bend the toes the wrong way until we've released her bitter buttons. The container must be airtight and her creases carefully spread in the shade, buried where we store the mermaid milk that's uncurdled. Glad tells me what she wants: "jam stuffed in the hole of a ginger bun, a ham, corn, salted."

When we get back to the van the trees feather east and west, their trunks springing foam. The sky still muted but angrily moving. Aubrey is propped under a tree, under a tent of shirts. Faith and I crawl immediately into the van. Our stomachs lurch and want and scream. "The twins?" Glad asks, but I don't know. We stay on my side of the curtain.

THIRTEEN

I wake up when it's still night and grab the beads from my belly. On top of Glad is a purple plastic cup. The van rocks and bubbles. Everything is wet, the blankets on which we sleep, my hair and Glad's t-shirt. I shake her. A scream. She looks around, up at the ceiling and windows. Rivulets of water push through the cracks. I crawl to the door and use Glad's help to open it. Water slows a hurry, but it's with force, and the bottom of the van covers in instant glass.

We leap from the door, paddle with our sleep hands, and grab onto good sand. It's a dark hour. I'm disoriented and hang onto it. I don't want to define what is happening around me. I am not uneasy, I feel sudden and choking absence. I feel each and every organ. I look to Glad and watch her averted eyes, the darkness of her shock. I go to seek it, her arms, but she won't have it. It's raining hard, and for a moment, I think, what simplicity. There have been many moments when I have loved just this—caught and wet. I am a rock in a field and this is nourishment for all around me. I look for Aubrey and see her there, or anyway, her form is there beneath wet shirts. I hear Glad's cry and no longer remember any of my thanks for the rain. I am not a rock. I am not fed. The van is surrounded in a pool, sinking into a hole that gives like skin. There is water up to the head lights, long removed. We wait. There is water at the windows. I close my eyes, where there has never been sun.

“Are you awake?” Aubrey says. “Wake up.”

I clutch my body. I hold my warmth and sleep. I take my time and my head lurches. My mouth is fatty and too early. Birds bicker, sharp and unfinished songs. An unseen laugh and hot machine, but it's early enough for one to two cool breaths off the water. I can smell spoil but my hunger's still bright. I pull myself to the cooler, hoping for a crumb of something or other, and open to find it empty and clean. Aubrey looks to the woods.

"In the night," she begins, "...I grow hungry." She is wearing Glad's heart from her ear. It thumps the side of her neck.

The morning sun catches on the rusted van top, the final edge, and sprays light in a wide and generous fan. The thinnest blades on the tallest trees, top and bottom, become crisp and wrinkled. Plastic bags hang from their elbows. Aubrey picks skin shed from her arms. She does not look better; her mouth wilts around the skull and the eyes are sicking. Glad remains asleep.

My mind spins, but I set it aright. I will find the twins, I think, and I will appeal to them. I know the three they enjoy and I know how to get and give. We need a bigger, better pit, further from shore. In these days of Aubrey's return I have forgotten myself. I notice that my nails have the fray of a horse's hoof. I feel my face and feel the common weed, the simple green sprigs that grow abundantly in the wet ground, surrounding the swamps. I feel blunted and my hair falls in full. I am missing things. We are alone. Yes, we will build a bigger pit, and we will do it with the twins. We will heat stones for each orifice and we will build a sharp bed to open the skin's breath. It will be tight and

difficult. She will be sorry but we will make her anew. We will present her in our great pride, we sisters from The Bay, and the Faint will offer cheese and gifts in our beauty, offerings for our undead. They will see what we can do. Glad believes we are growing weaker, but I tell her this is because we are in everything.

A fish jumps nearby and I stand. I am ready. I have all of the world's thirst. Firey and feathered scrub won't sink. My hand is still for another lashing fish. I grab it and slice a fin but it frees. I hear calls that are persistent and random. The waves draw back.