2012

In the place of forgotten things

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In the place of forgotten things

by

Genevieve DuBois

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Dean Bakopoulos, Major Professor
Rick Bass
Linda Shenk
Norman Scott

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2012

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Prologue: Hello, My Name Is

On the news you see all the ways a world can end. You see the inhuman sweep of tsunamis fiery with debris and a woman bent over the body of a man and the bloody scrawl of sweat on the face of an unordained soldier and the glacial fjords on faces in cold rooms and all the sad and funny things people say and the internet videos they make about the things they find both sad and funny and who’s dating and what shapes they crack between their fingers at the table and what debris we can loot from their sidewalks and what we should watch and how we should listen and whole species of animal sinking silent into bone and slow changes in the chemistry of the Earth you do not want to understand and the molecular deaths growing in distant countries that could kill you (getting closer) and strangers that hate you and your pastel spring fashions and new galaxies discovered so far away the light that reaches you now is a billion years old, older than dust.

So: you close your computer. You turn off the TV. You put away your handhelds and your PDAs and your tablets and your smartphones and various electronic products named after fruit and you go take out the trash, which is full and beginning to reek of Thursday’s salmon, parts both cooked and raw.

Welcome to my world.

I have green eyes. During the summer I live in a trailer in my parents’ backyard. I have two friends that I love and four more to whom I rarely speak. I am twenty-two. Usually I am single. I have been all my life neither first nor last when teams are being chosen regardless of the sport but somewhere in the middle where the bell curve of mediocrity begins to fall off. If I could have any superpower it would be to fly (which is more popular than invisibility but less popular than mind-reading). During the year I work across the street
from the hipster espresso bar (definitely cool) at the main campus library (somewhat less cool). I used to think I would be a photographer. I used to think I would travel. I like Italian food more than any other kind of food except Thai. I like peanut butter but not with jelly.

I am hungry.
1. Before the Birds Come

In the beginning there was too much grief. It floated in the house like an unemployed cousin overstaying his welcome, and no matter how obsessively Mom scrubbed the place still smelled of unwashed dishes and the bottoms of old shoes. Pops had died three weeks ago. In our comfortable ignorance of his continued existence, none of us were prepared for it. The last time Dad mentioned his father I was eleven and Dad said he was no longer worth the time it took to love him. Now Pops was dead and still Dad said nothing—nothing at all. He’d barely spoken a word since Pops’ housekeeper called us, repeating the words over and over in hysterical Spanish: he’s dead. He’s dead. Dad also stopped going to work at the firm even though he helplessly loved the numbers he worked with, maybe better than he loved us.

The weather was strange that week: blowing hot then cold, clouds scudding across the sky so fast the shape of it changed one hour to the next, light fading in and out against the gold and dusky green of California hills. I was home for my last summer of college and time had the chewy consistency of all summers, the days blending into each other one set of headlines much like the next. Wondering what I was supposed to feel in the absence of my grandfather I watched Mom fuss over Pops’ memorial, folding the plans into the calls and prattle of her decorating business. I drifted. I waited for something to happen. The first day I remember beginning to end is this one, a Monday: the day the bird entered my life.

That morning I stayed inside in the air conditioning in lieu of inhaling the dust off dry farms in my trailer—a little fifth-wheel camper that we used to haul on family trips as part of the Outdoor Education effort and was now relegated permanently to the backyard. One summer Dad had put up an ad and that same day I moved in. He took the ad down.
I made an omelet with onions and mushrooms and Colby cheese and was sitting at the table with yesterday’s crossword when Mom came in and said we had to go see the lawyer. To talk about the will.

“No thanks,” I said. “I’ll stay here.” Most of the entries I could barely guess at. So I was making up words to fit the spaces.

“You should come if you want anything to remember him by,” she said.

How would some dusty knick-knack recall memories I didn’t have? The thought left a sour taste in my mouth. I didn’t even know if he’d liked me.

“I don’t care,” I said and continued to say until finally: “He’s your grandfather,”

Mom hissed to the side of my face.

How was I supposed to argue with that?

The first of five scenes from five nightmares

1. A heavy black sun rising beyond hills before me and the hard hot hurting it brings in my chest. A gaunt bear wandering the forest behind. A carpet of brown needles. This place: a wasting sickness.

The fish tank burbled, a faint coating of algae tinting the glass and water green. A hospitable addition to an otherwise antiseptic lawyer’s office though the fish inside were bland enough. They shaped small Os of mock surprise with their mouths. The light through the tilted blinds filtered the dust that settled on all of us—my parents, me, and the lawyer behind his plateau of a desk. Between that golden haze and the gurgle of the tank I felt hazy
myself. I wanted to get back to my crossword. I thought I knew one of the answers and it throbbed in my fingers.

“So,” said the lawyer, looking down his thick nose at us though we sat at the same level. He drummed on his desk with both hands, a manila folder between them. There was something melty about him, as though the skin of his hands might merge into the surface of the desk if he left them still too long. “This is everyone?” He was a man somewhat older than my parents, with graying red hair and eyes so pale I’d thought he was blind until he looked right at me. I stopped picking at the peeling veneer on the edge of his desk. “Not much of a family, are you?”

Mom’s smile bruised. “No one else could come.”

“Yes, yes,” he said. “I’ve notified them as well. All. Properly. Notified.” He punctuated each word with a rap of his knuckles. He looked at Dad with some private amusement, then me. “This must be the granddaughter.”

His glassy gaze slid across me. In high school we’d dissected a sheep’s eyeball, and I recalled the thin milky membrane over it, the rubbery flesh that cocooned it, the way it seemed eternally about to blink. Now I even smelled that faint stench of formaldehyde.

My heart hardened through with the not-wanting of her-saying-it but my mother introduced me anyway. “This is Myna.”

“Like the bird. Myna.” His mouth abruptly shaped a smile with too much teeth in it.

“That’s a nice name.”

Listen:

I do not like birds.
Here are five reasons.

1) They smell.

2) Remember bird flu?

3) When I was four a bird saw my flower barrette gleaming, swooped down, and pecked at my hair. A sudden sharp pain, the tangle of claws against my head: I screamed—I was four, give me this—screamed and cried at the same time and swatted at a warm soft body and my fingers came away from my scalp wet with blood. I thought I was dying. I still have a little scar above my right ear.

4) In high school all the seagulls lined up on top of the cafeteria during the eleven o’clock hour like malevolent harbingers—they knew better than we did the arrival of lunch. We ate beneath the ever-present threat of airborne shit while they fought with crows over our leftovers: paper bags and candy wrappers and smears of peanut butter and mayonnaise. Kids trapped them, threw things at them, fed them things that made them swell and choke and foam at the mouth, but their numbers never dwindled.

5) My name. Myna. Mynabird. Eena Meena Myna Mo. Catch a Myna by the toe. If she hollers let her go. Eena Meena Myna…

“Thanks,” I said.

“Well.” He scraped his gaze back to the file in his hands. “Let’s get down to business.”
The will was painstaking and my knee rattled with boredom. Pops had enumerated everything that belonged to him with a precision that made me wonder how much time he had spent thinking about death and weighing his possessions against it. The lawyer read through parts with us explaining various inheritance laws as he went and every time he said I wanted to say Not You but didn’t and listened to him list out all the things Pops had left behind that morning he fell asleep for the last time in his purple corduroy chair.

“And Myna, I have a favor to ask you in particular: please return the bird to its rightful owner.”

“What?” I said, jolted awake, and Mom and even the lawyer looked taken aback. His gaze flickered toward me.


“He never kept pets,” Mom said. “He can’t have a bird.” Her stare accused me. I shrugged.

“That’s what it says, down here at the bottom,” the lawyer said, and repeated it.

“Please return the bird to its rightful owner.”

Mom frowned. “Maybe he meant a sculpture? Did he borrow a sculpture?” Dad throughout merely looked out the window, the view of the parking lot largely obscured by a feathery pepper tree. I envied him his inattention.

“No idea,” I said.

“Well,” said the lawyer, closing his folder and turning his back on us to file it. “That might be something to look in to?”
As we left I noticed one of the fish—an ugly orange and tan one with filmy fins—had gone belly-up in the tank. The other fish didn’t seem to have noticed that blatant cry for attention. They drifted between thin algal trees, their mouths shaping the same syllable again and again.

The second of five scenes from five nightmares

2. Trying to make a sandwich, I take two slices of rye and pile on everything in the fridge. Smoked ham, sliced turkey, two kinds of lettuce, beefsteak tomatoes, cucumbers just beginning to wrinkle, banana peppers, red bell pepper, avocado, pre-sliced Swiss cheese. But bits of it keep slipping out between the bread, turning to maggots and insects and crawling away along the counter. I eat as fast as I can. I don’t want to waste this sandwich.

This town was a chewing gum town. Atascadero was one of a long string of drive-thru communities along the 101, too far from the ocean to matter. You’d find bits of aesthetic improvement effort clinging to unexpected places the way lumpy pastel wads of gum cling to the underside of desks and the sides of pay phones, but all the sweetness was gone.

“Here we go,” Mom said. She pulled into the driveway, her mouth a hard line.

Pops’ house was a single-story70’s ranch style house, built on a neat square of land from before people thought of spaciousness as something that should be sought indoors. It sat back from a broad empty street of similar houses, below the gnarled claw of a huge old oak.
When Mom unlocked the door and pushed it open the house smelled the same as I remembered, though I hadn’t known that I remembered that smell. Pops’ cigarettes, and slightly burnt toast, and chocolate. I can’t remember him ever eating the stuff but his house and his clothes always smelled a little like chocolate.

For a boring exterior the interior was very well kept—tasteful furniture of a faintly Colonial style, unobtrusive paintings on the walls. There was none of the ordinary crap people have—the stuff that tells you what kind of people they really are despite their protests to the contrary.

“Ohay,” said Mom, setting her purse on the kitchen counter with a loud rattle of buckles and leather. “Where’s this supposed bird?” She disappeared into the next room.

Standing in the open place between the kitchen and the living room I watched Dad walk to the baby grand piano in the corner of the living room, lift the fallboard and press one of the white keys near the middle. The note was louder than I expected, quavering with a hard whine at the end of it. Even I could tell it was out of tune.

I stared at the quarter-sized bald spot on the back of my dad’s head. It was a mistake bringing my father and his silence here. Sadness undulated around him like jelly, thick and too sweet. But Mom had insisted on coming directly. “I hate mysteries,” she’d said.

The house had absorbed the absence of my grandfather into its bones. As if now in Pops’ absence the house could assume a life of its own and it had. I touched the wall and it felt sticky like skin.

I had been in places like this before: places that no longer were what they were meant to be and still held those ghosts inside of them. Restaurants that went out of business and became hair salons or greeting card shops always had the same soft sadness about them,
a waiting hunger. The hairdresser would cut your hair and chatter at you about movie stars while you dreamed spaghetti dreams and you’d never know why.

*The third of five scenes from five nightmares*

3. There’s always the one where I’m trying to run and can’t. I’m moving in slow motion, nothing solid to push off of, muscles like water. Fingertips grasp at my shoulder-blades.

I sat in Pops’ purple corduroy chair.

I sat in Pops’ purple corduroy chair and felt the arms where the fabric had been worn down to the coarser weave and looked at the photo of Grammy on the mantel. She’d died a few years before I was born and all I really knew of her was this picture taken late in life. One of the few things Dad had ever said about her was how pretty her blond hair was. In the picture it had taken on the brassy sheen of hair dye. She stood very straight, her smile glassy.

“I don’t understand,” Mom said, circling back through the kitchen. “There is no bird.” She went out the side door into the yard.

I thought: *This is the chair where Pops died.*

Dad sat still on the piano bench, thinking himself somewhere else. The sun fell hard against the thick ochre curtains and the light that penetrated was dusty and weak and collapsed to the floor and I felt my understanding of him collapse with it. That’s how deep his solitude went, walls drawn up like concrete.

“Dad?” I said.
On the table by Pops’ old corduroy chair, the phone shrilled a hard ring from buried decades. I jumped. Dad didn’t. But in his father’s house I still waited for him to answer it. When two rings passed and he hadn’t moved I picked up. It seemed odd to me the number had not been disconnected.

“Hello?”

The silence pulsed with static.

“Hello?” said a woman’s voice. Pleasant and distant. As if she spoke to someone on her end and not to me.

“Who is this?”

“Hello?”

“I think you have the wrong number.”

“No,” she said, her voice abruptly clear and strong. “Hold on a minute, please?”

Startled I hung up, rattling the phone in its cradle.

A shadow moved across the floor. There was a rustling as of leaves on the other side of the window near my head. I thought I saw a hand on the glass from the corner of my eye and I rose, but there was no one. The sound was coming from the other room. Or maybe from inside my own head. Or maybe the whole world was staring in.

Usually houses are my shell. Usually I am the ensconced eyes peering out. But I felt the same creeping pressure as though at every window there were eyes, as though every window was an eye, and I went into the bedroom, following the sound that scratched at the inside of my brain.

*The fourth of five scenes from five nightmares*
4. The one where I keep bleeding. My skin gets very thin, like pie crust rolled out too far, and the blood can’t help but break through in places, seeping out sometimes sluggish and sometimes quick. I leave bloody footprints on the floor.

In this room the blinds were drawn and the scratching sound came from the closet. It seemed wrong to me that my grandfather’s house should be allowed to fill itself with these lonely noises in his absence. Nerves raw, I went to the closet and opened it.

Dust crawled up my nose and I sneezed. Pops’ clothes were all still there, his colorless jackets and shirts and pants hung neatly above his shoes.

And the birdcage.

It had an old blue towel thrown over it and the scraping and rustling and I thought *this is a bad idea, Myna*, but I went ahead and lifted the towel anyway.

The fat little yellow bird untucked its head from its wing and glared at me. All birds glared at me—they always had—but of course birds only have one expression. That’s one of the things that got to me the most. Add it to the list.

6. *Birds watch you with round eyes like berries.*

This one flapped its wings a few times without urgency, spinning circles of dust around it in the dull light as though had been coated along with everything else in the closet. There was a basket of seeds, nearly empty. Water, too. Well.
It surprised me that Pops would have a bird. I tried to remember any proclivity in him towards bird ownership but I could remember nothing except making pancakes with him one Sunday morning.

I showed Pops I knew how to crack the eggs into the bowl without getting pieces of shell in there too. He nodded and poured the milk in after them. Somewhere in that sunshine my parents’ voices hummed about other things, rising into argument and falling, but we were concentrating on this ourselves, the two of us. I liked the sour smell of pancake mix, I liked watching Pops scoop the pancakes up with the spatula and flip them. He moved his hands precisely. He was not a wasteful man.

“Listen,” he said.

I heard my parents fighting: something about my sister.

“Not to that,” he said, and pointed. There was a bird just outside the open window. It wore flecks of yellow and black and brown and white. It clung to a thin branch and chirped a cascade of sharp bright notes.

“Mom?” I called out. I listened to the emptiness of the house until the static in my ears coalesced into the sound of water dripping somewhere, trickling in the walls.

*The fifth of five scenes from five nightmares*

5. The one where I’m sitting in my backyard, looking for Allie even though I don’t want to, and there’s an enormous negative space moving over the town in the shape of a storm, and I forget that I’m looking for her without fully forgetting
and I’m staring up at the bare bones of the sycamore trees, thick with paint-spattered crows staring down: then the realization—I do not own my skin.

“Mom?”

Mom poked her head around the doorframe. “What is it, sweetheart?”

She hadn’t called me sweetheart since I was a kid. “There’s a bird here.”

“A what?” Something ugly moved behind Mom’s brown eyes. She strode toward me, her black pumps driving round depressions into the carpet. “A real bird? You’re not serious?”

“It’s a yellow bird,” I said, like it mattered.

She put her hand on my shoulder. “That is a bird,” she said. “Disgusting. I loathe birds.”

I knew Mom didn’t like birds but I thought it was only because she didn’t like messes. “Me too.”

“I don’t like birds,” I told him.

“Why not?” he asked me. At the time I didn’t know how to answer him.

“When I was your age,” he said, “I wanted to be a bird.”

I made a face. “Why?”

“Birds link the sky to the ground,” he said, smiling. “They get both. Aren’t you just a little jealous of that?”

“I guess,” I said.
Mom’s hand tightened on my shoulder. Her laugh was a bark in the back of her throat. “Not as much as I do,” she said.

“Yes.”

Mom’s smile faded as she gazed at me. I was fully willing to be ridiculous. She exhaled through her nose and looked at the bird. “They’re like rats except worse. The dirtiness of them. Nasty little things. We should probably just kill it.”

“What?”

“Kill it. Or at least put it back outside.”

“It’s not a wild bird,” I pointed out. “It’s in a cage.”

---

The bird lifted off from the bush too quickly to see—I glimpsed it spiraling into sky.

“Everything’s got a place,” Pops said. “Everything’s got something it needs to do. That is why your sister left. Understand?”

In the other room, Mom was crying.

“All you can do,” Pops said, “is help it find its way home.”

---

“What’s the difference, really?”

I wasn’t keen on the bird myself, but Mom’s insistence unnerved me. “If Pops wanted me to have the bird, I want to take the bird.”

“Myna, it can’t be that important.”

“I want to take the bird.”
I had the suspicion that good deeds were not supposed to be this unwilling but they were, for me. Every time.
You

You are the baddest nine-year-old in the neighborhood. Not bad like you do bad things, but sick, like ill, like awesome. You’ve got a coonskin cap like Davy Crockett and pair of silver Colts at your hips with the orange plastic tips and a brand new BMX bike that soaks jealousy out of everyone. Well it’s red. It’s shining. It’s got the sickest fox logo on it. You call it the Killer Fox. You scratched its name into the back of it like so.

The coonskin cap is the very first thing you found. At first you hoped it was real but the tag says Made in China, which really didn’t matter to you after all. You wear it everywhere you go, all over town, biking up ramps and jumping off curbs. It’s like a sign. You’ve begun to collect them, these signs. You have a whole treasure trove down by the creek in the park.

You are the baddest eight-year-old that ever lived. That’s a fact.
2. The Empty Days

Whenever I’d stay somewhere that wasn’t my room as a kid—like on family vacations to some desolate wilderness—I’d lie awake at night listening. I’d sleep on a bed that was too small in a room that was too large and full of shadows with edges too sharp. The wrong shadows—and you don’t know how you measure out the shapes of the familiar ones until you are in the wrong place, and the chilled drafts shave across the side of your face the wrong way, and the sheets are too thin to keep them out.

Sometimes the sounds would be an oak tree tapping against the window. Passing footsteps of a stranger or the rustle of a possum. An old structure settling into roots. The rattle of a radiator in the guts of the hotel. A dripping faucet. A squirrel on the roof. Paper rattling in an air vent. Once there was even a mouse in one of the rooms—it took me minutes stretched long into night-hours to work up the courage to walk barefoot across the floor to open that closet door, behind which was sure to be some dripping fanged conglomeration of all my nightmares. I opened the door and the beast shrank down to something small and furry and scurried across the floor to a hole behind the dresser and pop disappeared.

We all have our safe places, and those places are getting smaller. We have family, roommates, pets, friends—they follow us into our living spaces, out into the streets. To be alone we retreat into our bedrooms and then our beds. We lie staring at the ceiling thinking about everything outside our doors, outside our walls. Trying to make our skin as thick as possible while our thoughts pull the world in.
My memory was full of these rooms. Secretly, I didn’t know what I’d do if I ever got married. I’d have to find another room to hide in.

That night the crickets started. Only a few of them that first night but loud like they’d settled right into my ears, shrieking up at the moon like a chorus of tiny broken clarinets. Between the crickets and the wind rattling the sycamores I slept in pieces, with a vague dreaming of wings, a fluttering at my throat.

The crickets quieted with dawn, but a few still wound up sporadically to spite me. I squeezed my eyes shut and imagined their yard—my yard—drying up, brown grass and bristling hedges shriveling back to dirt, leaving them nowhere to hide, to scrape song. I imprinted this image on the inside of my skull.

When I found the energy I got up and went inside and napped on the couch until Mom’s shrill phone voice began to intrude on my sleep-drunk thoughts, her tone darkening as she tried to explain to Marcela why we no longer needed her services, how we weren’t going to pay her anymore, so why was she coming back, why was she feeding the bird, why had she kept it hidden, why hadn’t she told us about the damn bird in the first place…

*No, no,* Marcela kept saying, her voice rising too. *You don’t understand. Es importante. El viejo…*

I could not hear the rest. Mom snapped at her, said something about the real world and changing locks and knowing when you’re being let go, hung up, and stood at the counter tapping her fingers on the granite into that final silence. “So what are your plans for today?” she asked as though there was no question of me being awake.
Involuntarily I glanced upstairs toward the computer room, where we’d stashed the bird until we figured out a better place for him. Her. It. I’d maintained my trailer was too hot for a bird and maybe it was, but really I didn’t want it watching me sleep.

“I don’t have any,” I said.

“Maybe you could start in on those GRE books I got you?” Her voice crackled. Mom wanted me to go to graduate school because she hadn’t. She said that college wasn’t special enough anymore. She used those exact words.

The phone rang again. Mom was already walking away. Her voice, hollow: “Get that, Myna, would you?”

I grabbed the phone off its perch. “Hello?”

“—have not yet tried our patented foot bath and massager you are missing out on the home spa experience of a lifetime. One of thousands of satisfied customers, Susan of Vacaville, writes in, “Before I tried SpaSoothe Luxe Edition I would come home from work with my feet just aching. But after only a week—”

Telemarketers. This was a new one but I maybe no one could afford real people to speak into the phones anymore. I could do it though. I could talk for next to nothing. Better that than the nothing that was waiting to swallow me down.

I hung up on the prerecorded message and two seconds later my cell phone chirped. I exchanged one device for the other.

It was Clary. Clary was the one friend I had left over from high school. She’d gone to community college for two years and then started working for a bank and now made more money than I probably would for years.

“What,” I said.
“Hello to you too.” She wanted to go to the mall. “I promise it’s better than whatever you’re doing right now.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Unless you’ve got some boyfriend I don’t know about, yeah huh.”

“What do you want at the mall?”

“Just come, Myna.”

When I went outside twenty minutes later Clary was leaning into the rearview mirror of her Focus, piling on as many waxy layers of red lipstick as would go. She’d been this way since we met in junior high Health: a little self-obsessed, a little distant, the kind of person who’d never been asked to care too hard about anything, I thought. When I got into the car she popped her mouth at her reflection and leaned across me to throw the tube back in the glove compartment.

“How’s it,” she said. “Hold these.” She thrust a massive bunch of sunflowers in my face. The wet stems dripped on my jeans. I gripped them between my knees anyway and used my hands to balance the drooping heads.

“How do I look?” she said, pouting at me.

“How do you not get any of that stuff on your teeth?”

“Magic,” she said. “You’re in a good mood today.”

“Not sleeping.” I watched suburban tract houses flash by above a bristling field of yellow petals as she drove stutter-stop through a neighborhood so familiar to me even this new day draped over it seemed tired. I knew how all those houses looked. Their innards the accumulated clutter of years, expired toys and unread books and photo albums full of
silverfish jammed into many small dark rooms. All sharing an obdurate wretchedness that seeped out of the pores of people and walls rather than settling down upon them.

“Too hot? Too cold?”

“Nah. Crickets.”

“Crickets?”

“What do you want at the mall. Anyway.”

“Okay, so we’re not really going there. But before you shut me down hear me out, okay? So I’m going to say, ‘There’s this guy,’ okay? And you’re going to go all cold-face and say ‘Clary-e.’ And I’m going to say, ‘it’s not like that, okay? He’s married.’ And then you’re going to look really horrified, and say, ‘Clary.’ And I’m going to say, ‘It’s not like that, okay? He works in my office and he’s going through a really hard time and I want to do something nice for him. So I’m bringing him flowers.’ And you’re going to say, ‘What kind of “hard time”,’ still suspicious, and sorry, but I’ll say ‘It’s not really your business, Myna,’ and you’ll say, ‘Don’t get all pissy, I’m just trying to look out for you,’ and I’ll say, ‘I can’t do something nice for someone who’s been nice to me?’ and you’ll say, ‘That’s kind of out of character for you, Clar-e,’ and I’ll say “Fuck off, I can’t do something nice for someone who’s been nice to me?’ and you’ll say—”

“Okay, okay, I get it.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

She braked for a stop sign. I watched a kid bike past us into the parallel crosswalk, spokes blurring.

“I love you and everything, but you really like to assume the worst about people.”

“No I don’t.”
She grinned. “Myna.”

She’d always had this way of making me feel like a child. That was maybe the real reason we were still friends. I could not let her go, her and her domed forehead, her dyed black hair, the delicate way she folded her hands like wings, the compulsive way she still twisted paperclips into abstract shapes and abandoned them, her forced fascination with old movies starring Audrey Hepburn or Grace Kelly, the obstinate way she carried herself despite or maybe because of the weight she’d gained since high school, her false toughness.

Friends have always been friends that way. Unable to let each other go.

“Anyhow,” she said. “It’s his wife. She’s sick. They don’t know what it is but she’s sick. So I want to do something nice for him.”

“I still don’t think this is a good idea.”

“So?”

So I don’t like being implicated in mistakes. “Don’t drag me into this. I don’t know this guy…”

“Max? You can stay in the car. I just need you there. For support or whatever.”

She stopped again. Again the kid caught up to us, whizzing past without a glance.

He—or maybe she, I wasn’t sure—wore a coonskin cap in place of a helmet, the striped tail flying back in the wind. He took his hands off the handlebars and stretched his arms out, soaring away down the sidewalk.

“Clary,” I said. “I don’t want to go back.”

She twisted her face at me. “I thought you were bored out of your mind.”

“No. That was you. I mean I don’t want to go back to school.”
A Personal Dilemma:

So say you’re going to college and you feel pretty good about it. You’re good at class. You’re good at learning. Most of all you’re good at finishing things and you would never even think about not finishing. But one year goes by and two and something strange starts to happen. It’s not that you don’t have friends. You have friends. It’s not that you don’t have places to go. You have places to go. It’s something thin and insidious like the fog that hangs over the dim campus lake at night—never thick enough to keep you from seeing the other side. You look around at people who paint their electric faces for football games. Who campaign for positions in student government with their dreams fixed beyond. Who organize volunteer events to benefit Habitat for Humanity or poor kids from immigrant families. Who care about things. You don’t care about things. Maybe there’s something wrong with you.

Maybe one of those people is someone you admire but don’t know very well. Maybe they live through the door next to yours. Maybe they are having a conversation with other people you don’t admire quite as much but know better. Maybe they are slouched on a sagging plaid couch in the common room with the others, maybe they’ve had a few too many. Maybe they are pink-cheeked and ranting about everything wrong with education today. Maybe they use you as an example. Maybe they point out there’s more to life than doing the work assigned to you. Maybe they seem to think nothing
they say could be insulting to you, because you would never believe what they are saying. Because you are in some integral way irrecoverable.

And here are people older than you smiling so hard and saying these are the best years of your life. These are the best years of your life. So what do you want to do when you’re done? What do you want to be?

I was kind of afraid, I think, of the person I would be when I went back to school.

“You?” Clary snorted. “Myna, you’re the biggest nerd I know.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ll be fine.” She removed a hand from the steering wheel to poke my arm. It had been a long time since I’d had any kind of serious conversation with Clary and in fact I wasn’t sure that we’d ever had one. I wasn’t sure we were capable of it.

“I know,” I said.

“Here we are,” she said, pulling up to the curb by a development of red-tile-roofed houses and condos so new they sparkled. Some of them didn’t look occupied yet, drought-resistant yards and bare doorsteps stripped of individual flaws and personality. Beyond the row facing the street I could see the shapes of houses reaching back along streets in the shapes of rivers, huddled among others like themselves.

Across a street too broad for the sparse traffic on it—a tumbleweed mile—was a fading strip mall, the only sign of life a neon Budweiser sign flickering in a darkened window.

“Well,” Clary said. “Wish me luck.” Her voice was breathy with the dangerous kind of excitement I recognized from when we were younger and she wanted me to hide silk
underwear in my shirt in Victoria’s Secret. She peered in the mirror, pulling at her hair to flatten it. Beyond her I saw the kid—that same kid—biking up the opposite side of the street. He stopped now to look at us.

“Why the hell,” I said, handing her the flowers, “would you need luck?”

She yanked the flowers from me and went up to the bland beige door of a bland orange duplex with a dying palm knockoff in front and knocked.

A story about Clary (I told to myself, watching from a distance):

When the door swings open the first thing she notices is the inside is not air conditioned as she has come to expect. Hot air gusts into her reeking of the insides of houses no one wants to see. Several fans rattle into a sound like a coming storm.

The girl at the door is thirteen or so, thin and suspicious. Her blond hair droops around her ears, and inexpertly applied eyeshadow domes her eyes in blue. She’s giving Clary the mirror of her own thousand-yard teenage stare, the haughtiness exhibited towards anyone more than a few years older than her.

“Yeah?” she says, and Clary wants to slap her, wants to shake her and hug her and tell her it will only get worse—alienation will lose its glamour but she’ll have bruised too many hearts to recognize her own among them.

“Your dad here?” says Clary.

The girl drops away from the door. Somewhere in the back a shadow moves, a terrier with a jangling collar. “Dad?” the girl yells. “Someone at the door for you.”

Max comes to the door without speaking, a stocky man in his early forties with the fading musculature and crew cut of a college athlete. She sees the way he
looks—the sagging face, the stained t-shirt, the wrinkled khakis—and she’s embarrassed. Sure she pities him but she wishes his struggle didn’t show so much.

“How’s your wife?” she says. He recognizes her of course and he’s trying to smile.

“Clary,” he says her name. “What are you doing here?” She can tell he doesn’t want her here.

“I brought flowers,” she said. “For sympathy.” She stands with her arms full of thick sunflowers, scentless and wide as saucers and they look only like daisies, they really do—fat, fibrous daisies. Yet she can’t shake the feeling that the world is watching her. That the world is waiting to see what she’s going to do.

“Thank you,” Max says. He takes the flowers, his hands knocking against hers. “I’m sorry. I’d ask you to come in but this isn’t a good time.”

“That’s okay,” Clary says. “I have to run anyway.”

And she runs, and she goes, and she leaves him standing there, the door hanging open until he moves inside to close it.

Clary slid back into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. “Well,” she said. “That went well.”

Her hands trembled on the steering wheel. Her eyes bright.

I looked at the house. Upstairs a woman stood in the window looking back at us. Clary, but also me. She let the curtain drop and turned away.

I wondered what it would be like to be dying from something like cancer but not familiar enough to name. Nobody wants to know about some new disease that can eat at you
from the inside. Nobody wants to know how the gardens of organs inside you can wither, the pink trembling viscera deflating, blackening, spotted with disease like aphid-eaten roses.

There is no cure for cancer but there are probabilities. There are antioxidants and exercise and prayer and other hopes false and real.

What could you do with something like this but wait?

“I could feel it,” Clary said, pulling away from the curb. The car behind us swerved and blared its horn, nearly hitting us anyway, but she didn’t seem to notice. “I could feel it inside his house. This sort of weight—like an elephant in every room.”

I swallowed my heartbeat, unclenched my hand from the door.

“It’s so weird,” Clary said.

“ Weird how?”

“That she would get sick like this, and that they would be so quiet, so secret about her being sick. Doesn’t this happen all the time? Don’t people just fucking deal with it? I mean, people die all the time, so what’s the big fucking deal?”

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I glanced at the name: Ruby. It could wait. I silenced my phone without answering.

“Everyone handles it differently,” I said. I wondered what it would feel like, to be dying like that.

“It’s just… I don’t know.”

“Fascinating.”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, that’s it, exactly.”

Like a desert unfolding within, leeching the moisture from your bones and leaving dust and sand in its wake. Like a shadow of a person moving along the forgotten pathways of your body, searching for the beautiful pieces you have forgotten how to find.
Clary drove me back. Both of us sour and tired and silent.
The dog’s Story

The dog is having a bad day. Awoken in an alley stinking of beer and old bananas by the busboy who in throwing out the garbage has chucked an empty bottle at his head, a shot of pain blossoming spontaneously from work-anger, day-off anger and deprivation to send him skittering out on all four legs, yelping fear defiance hurt anger hurt fear. The alley already quiet. A crow bent over the edge of the roof, watchful. First one eye, turn, the other. Trotted off looking vaguely for water, but the silty slick drainage of the day before was a sheet of mud and the hot air pressed down on his back and he lapped at hunger. Moseyed through the park nosing trash with bits of food still mired to it, chased by a slavering Doberman mix ripe through with meanness. Tore his ear on a chain link fence: the sticky twinge of blood. Now: the dog winds his way across a long unfamiliar neighborhood. He wants most right now a smaller animal to befriend or eat or chase. Then the blue car hits him.
3. The Hearts of Dogs and Birds Must be Held in Both Hands

Though the living room window I watched Clary stop the car, back up, and wait. The dog lay in the road in front of her.

“Stop,” I said to the glass.

A long moment passed. Then Clary drove slowly around the dog, giving it a wide berth, and zoomed off. Oh, Clary.

“Mom,” I said. “There’s a hurt dog in the road.”

“When did you get home?” she said, coming downstairs.

“Just now,” I said. “And there’s a hurt dog in the road.”

When I got her outside she made a wet choking sound, as though she’d swallowed a whole macadamia nut. The dog lay stretched out, one paw circling against the pavement like a machine wanting badly to keep doing what it was made to do. Mom ran over and hovered her hands over it. As if anyone had that kind of power.

“Wait here, Myna,” Mom said, and I understood this was going to take a while.

I squatted near the dog. Most of the time you don’t notice the texture of the roads you drive on. Not unless they’re really torn up. Cratered with potholes. Roads aren’t meant for stopping on. But if you do—if you get down low, put your ear to the hot tarry blacktop, you see a whole rippling topography of mountains and canyons stretching out in front of you. You start noticing the thick layers of yellow paint on the median, the way they don’t quite overlap. You start noticing the hard gray putty oozing out from underneath the orange plastic reflectors. You start noticing soda cans flattened for so long they’re almost silver again, and the fluttering Doritos bag that could have been there no longer than since yesterday. You start noticing the people’s shoes and the soles of them—how they wear and how much, the
different patterns of tread posing for personality. You start noticing all these details and they bury you.

Mom drove the car up next to me and popped the hatchback, getting out. She left the engine running and the stink of exhaust billowed over us, dizzying me. A stained pink towel hung from her hand. “Okay,” she said firmly, though her face twisted. “You’re going to have to help me here.” We looked at each other, and then down at the hurt dog. It wasn’t bleeding but there was something frightening and broken about it nevertheless.

“Oh no,” said a man’s voice behind us. “So sad.”

We turned. There was a pudgy man with a gleaming bald head standing on the sidewalk. His face drooped with sorrow or something like it, even though he smiled. His eyes were very dark, the whites of them almost entirely hidden by his squint. He reminded me of Pops’ lawyer—his features at once forgettable and unforgettable, the way a flood and an earthquake can destroy the same way. He had that same meltiness, the soles of his shoes blending into the asphalt, his feet threatening to follow.

“You need to take better care of your animals,” he said. “That poor dog has had better days I’m sure. I’m sure.”

“It’s not our dog.”

“You have a fenced yard, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, because we did.

“Then don’t let him out without a leash. That’s how accidents happen. That’s how these things happen.”

“It was an accident,” Mom said, somewhat indignant. She hated being accused of incorrect acts. “We’re helping the poor thing.”
“It’s not our dog,” I said again.

“That’s the real sadness of today,” he said. “Animals left wandering to fend for themselves. These are animals that should never have to hunt a day in their lives. You understand? You understand? It’s these people who don’t have any clue how to take care of a dog or a cat, and they wander through the wilderness like children themselves. They’re all children.” He came and squatted next to us and ran his hands—big and long-fingered for a man of his short stature—over the prone body of the dog, prodding here and there. “You should not leave this dog wandering to fend for itself. Bad idea, Myna—you must be Myna, right? Home for college. Cute idea, naming people after animals. I like that. What’s the dog’s name then, Adam? Bet it’s a real plain John name.”

I looked at Mom. “I—I don’t think it has a name.” That he knew mine made me nervous.

“Oh, come on,” he said, smiling with narrow teeth. His lower incisors seemed very long. “Of course he has a name. Henry? Joey?”

“His name is Methuselah.” I said the first non-traditional name I could summon.

The little man frowned. “Oh,” he said. “Well, we can’t all be winners. Here, let’s get him up into your car. Hold your Methuselah’s head for me, will you?”

I took the head gingerly between my palms, pressing up against the lower jaw and down between the ears, like I was blessing the dog with unbending fingers. I didn’t like touching a strange animal.
“Here goes,” said the man, and then he reached into the dog. I could have sworn there was no wound in the dog but he put his hands right into the belly of the dog, and fished around like he was reaching for something at the bottom of a murky pond.

The dog opened his eyes and squinted at me.

“Hey,” the dog said.

“Hey,” he repeated, because I hadn’t answered the first time.

“What?” The word bubbled up out of me, hovered by my lips for a moment, and then popped.

“You’re going to sit there and let him do this?”

The first time this happened was in the middle of a volleyball game in high school. I was about to serve the ball and a layer of cold descended between me and everything else—cold and soundlessness. Like my heart had stopped beating. I think I stumbled off the court and sat down. I think people were yelling at me. Every cell of mine was divorced from all the others and everything else that was left of me was unable to remember what it was. How to stay. But my heart swelled with blood and pumped it out again. I surfaced through amniotic layers to blink at my coach who crouched gazing at me with annoyance and worry and a face marked by pores that seemed so large and shiny with sweat I felt in that moment that I knew him better than anything and it terrified me.

I tried to explain it wasn’t my fault—I hadn’t even run the damn dog over, after all, and here I was doing my best anyway.
“Horseshit,” said the dog. “Look at this. Now someone’s rummaging around in my abdominal cavity and it hurts.”

“Look,” I said.

“No. I refuse to look.” The dog squeezed his eyes shut. “Wake me up when it’s over. And don’t tell him anything about the bird, for fuck’s sake.”

“Okay.” I said.

My mom and the little man bent over me. Mom spoke, her face concerned. I couldn’t understand a word—it was as though she spoke through thick glass, lips molding empty space. But the man spoke clearly, dark eyes meeting mine.

“You shouldn’t be messing around with things that don’t belong to you.”

“Why not?” I tried to say. I felt like there was a pebble lodged in my throat. He smiled insincerely. “Oh,” he said. “You’re a smart cookie.”

“Mya?” Mom said.

“A big squeamish, is she?” the man straightened, laughing. “And there isn’t even any blood.”

Mom smiled, caught between embarrassment and worry. “She’s fine,” she said. “You’re fine, right Myna?”

“Maybe I haven’t eaten enough today,” I said.
“Well, he’s good to go,” the little man said, offering me a hand up. “I think he’ll be okay, for now.”

I got up without his help. The dog now lay on a towel in the back of Mom’s car. The dog was ugly. Short hair that wanted to curl but didn’t. Something stocky and underbred in his carriage. Probably part pit-bull like most strays seemed to be. A dirty shade of brown. I did not want this dog.

“Sounds good,” said Mom, with forced cheerfulness. “Myna’s always wanted a dog, haven’t you, Myna? Looks like we’ve found one by accident. Poor thing.”

“Mom.”

“This is a good thing we’re doing, of course,” she said. “A really good thing.”

The dog was sleeping but I swear he slitted his eyes and blinked at me.

“What?” I said. “What?”

“First the bird, then this,” Mom was saying like she had to apologize. “Next, I’ll be finding a cat in the garage.”

“Bird?” the little man said. “You found a bird? What kind?”

“It’s not important.”

Mom frowned at me. “A yellow one.”

“Yellow?” he repeated and laughed, dry, more a cough than anything. He looked at me. His eyes amused and dark. A syrupy nausea churned in my stomach, that feeling I always got when I thought I was in trouble for unintentional wrongdoing.

I was rescued by the ringing of my phone in my pocket. “Hello?” I turned away from Mom and the little man, who were still talking.

“Myna Myna!”
“Ruby.” She’d graduated last year and was still the best friend I had at school but despite my relief at the distraction I couldn’t find the enthusiasm she deserved. “Sorry I didn’t pick up earlier. What’s up?”

“Good, good. Good. I wanted to make sure I caught you while I was thinking about it. I’m working on this project. A sort of campaign. To set up community gardens? We’re calling it Green the City. Maybe I’ve told you about it. Haven’t I told you about it?”

“I’m not sure.” Ruby had this way of picking up conversations that had never happened.

“If you want to help, we really could use a hand.”

“With what exactly?”

“Well, with the campaign. We’re short of recruits just now and I know you’re not doing anything this summer. I think this would be a really good experience for you. I really do.”

I switched the phone to my other ear, drawing out my distance from Mom and the little man. “You realize I’m not in the city?”

“Hold on a sec.”

I heard rattling in the background and the echo of cars like through tunnels in the rain. A voice echoed through that distorted space like a PSA through a megaphone.

“Sorry, call me if you decide you’re interested. Gotta run. Bye!”

Mom was wrapping up too. I scooted into the car so I didn’t have to face the little man again.

“Yes, yes,” Mom was saying. “Thanks for your help. Bye now.”
She got in and we drove off. I glanced in the rearview mirror: the little man stood in the middle of the street. He lifted a hand.

“Who was that?” I asked. “How does he know who I am?”

“Him? The new neighbor? He just moved in next door.”

“Into the Friedmans’ house?”

“No, the Steinmeyers’.”

“They moved?” Too bad—I’d liked that old couple. They got very touchy about their lawn flamingos, but when I was younger they’d given me homemade sugar cookies with colored sprinkles.

“No,” Mom said. “They were old.”

“Oh. Well, I didn’t like him very much.”

“Why not? He seems nice enough to me.”

Mom pulled into the strip mall where the nearest veterinarian was located, and I didn’t bother responding.

That night I dreamed the dog was talking to me again. He wore an eye patch.

“You bitch,” he said. “You let them mix me all up inside. My heart doesn’t know if it’s a kidney or a liver.”

“You’re fine,” I said. “You’re asleep in our garage. Look, I didn’t mean to.”

“Yeah, right,” said the dog. “I’m a mess. See?” He put down his nose and pawed away the eye patch with his front legs. There was a black hole where his eye was supposed to be, and it went all the way back into nothing.

“You gonna do something about that bird, or what?”
“What bird?”

“Don’t play dumb,” said the dog. “I told you not to tell him about the bird. I’m about done with you, you know that?”

I leaned forward, peering into the eye.

“Hold still,” I said.

“Careful,” the dog laughed. “You’ll trip.”

The black hole sucked me in and I went tumbling into a place where there was no ground to put my feet on, no way to stand upright. Threads I could not grasp drifted past me. I flailed.

I woke up sweating. My bed stifled. The crickets screeched. My body ached and the covers had twisted around my legs. I threw them off, got up and went outside barefoot. It was cooler out here and the grass was barely damp with dew. I sat in my pajamas on the grass and leaned back, filling my lungs with fresher air. I could still here the dog’s voice in my head: *I told you. I told you. I told you.*

The stars had that heavy brightness they get in the deeper parts of the night. Less light pollution, maybe. If I strained my eyes I could make out further fields of stars behind them, back and back. Like splashes of fish scales glinting.

A Story to Tell to Children:

Once upon a time (because all stories start this way) there was a beautiful woman (as all stories must have. Even the absence of a beautiful woman can be the tragedy.) This beautiful woman (as beauties tend to have some fatal flaw) was very vain, especially of the luminescence of her skin.
People used to say (as people love to talk) she was like the moon. Or like a star. Or some other attractive well-lit cosmic body.

She talked back to the wrong magical creature (something you should never do) and got herself turned into a fish.

The most beautiful fish in the sea. She glittered even in the deeps. She couldn’t speak anymore but something about the way she flipped her tail offended the wrong magical creature (again. Sometimes they’re just having bad days) and she was turned into an insect. Except that insect turned out to be a butterfly (which everyone knows is the only beautiful insect) and the way she glittered in the sun made the wrong man fall in love with her. In his urgency to snatch her from the sky he flung her deeper into it, dusting her scales across the great dome of the sky.

No one ever asked her how she felt about any of this. (Sometimes, kids, you have to speak up.)

Now look how the stars all glitter.
Avoid airports. People lose themselves in airports. The last time I was in one I saw a man crying on one of those orange bucket seats, the plastic kind you can’t sit on without sliding off. In airports you can’t pity anyone—they are only pathetic. People move in lines at the appointed times into the appointed spaces to emerge on the carousel clutching their limbs close, to be reclaimed by their baggage. Once I saw a man—a different man—screaming until he was red in the face for no apparent reason but rage. They took him away and not gently. That’s what I’m saying. When you travel: avoid airports.

-A
4. The Bird

I sat with the bird. I checked my email. There was another email from Allie and I deleted it without looking as per usual. A few emails from school asking for money and promising football tickets. I closed my email and looked at the bird.

The computer room had been my bedroom when I was a kid but now it was used mainly for storage. There was an old computer on the old desk with the old chair, surrounded by mislabeled boxes. Everything coated with benign forgetfulness. Dust, too.

*Bird inside cage* as opposed to *bird outside cage* made being in the same room with one tolerable. I supposed as birds went it was cute despite a somewhat motley appearance, if small and round and bright are the primary criteria for cuteness. It was a single quintessential shade of yellow, with a short pointed beak and feet that seemed too large and long-toed for its size. Feathers littered the bottom of the cage and I wondered if it was sick. Also I had no clue whether it was a he or a she or even how I might go about figuring that out. The neighbor had implied that he might know but no way was I going to ask him.

“Bird, let’s find out what kind of bird you are.” I searched for images of *small yellow bird*. “You look like this one. Canary. You a canary?”

The canary gave me a look of disdain. Or boredom. Or burning rage. Hard to tell.

The phone rang. “Mom!” I yelled, but my voice echoed in a house that felt empty. I picked up the phone and sighed out a *hello*.

There was a click. “Myna Foster?” said the telemarketer, because you can always tell a telemarketer’s click.

“No,” I said.
“Myna, it’s great to get the chance to finally speak with you. I would like to let you in on an amazing new offer to spice up your image and achieve that youthful, glowing beauty you’ve always wanted. Believe me the men will be falling all over you after merely three weeks of using one incredible product.” Her voice turned conspiratorial. “Believe me, this stuff really works, Myna. You do not want to pass this up.”

I was barely listening. There was an envelope inside the cage, underneath the dropping-littered newspaper.

“Only the other day, my sister asked me how I could possibly look so good, had I changed my personal trainer, and I could see how jealous she was—and believe it or not, I hadn’t lost a single pound, it was all because—”

“That’s nice,” I said, and hung up.

I opened the cage and gingerly snatched the envelope out, keeping an eye on the bird. Inside the envelope was a card—one of those simple Thank You cards diligent people buy in bulk. Inside it said Dear George, and nothing else. Lots of white space. I couldn’t tell whether it was my grandfather’s handwriting or not because I didn’t know what his handwriting looked like. I flipped the card over. Nothing. But Parkview Apartments, San Francisco, #302? was written on the envelope in faint pencil.

Was this what Pops had meant? About returning the bird to someone? I’d kind of thought he was joking. Or speaking in metaphor. That didn’t seem to be the case and frankly I wished it had stayed that way.

I went downstairs and fed the dog in the garage, where Mom had banished him contingent on some vague proof of good behavior. He seemed indifferent to my offering, not moving when I nudged the bowl closer. So I went and made my own lunch. I put a turkey
dog in the toaster oven and while I waited for it to heat up I flipped the card over in my hands. Dear George. Dear George, what was I supposed to do with you?

I thought it would be nice to have something to care about as much as Ruby cared about her work—she cared so hard even I could feel it over the phone. She was always involved in one project or another. She lived in San Francisco now with her vegan hipster boyfriend I’d never met even though Ruby was one of the last good friends I had left.

Somewhere in the depths of the house the phone trilled (not again), muffled by layers of insulation. Someone outside was playing basketball: I heard the high pitched ring of rebounding rubber against concrete. Farther out a chainsaw downed a rotten oak branch. The afternoon heat was low and hard and steaming in the corners. None of the homes here had enough trees—the subdivisions had all been planted with stunted saplings that sank into the dry depleted earth as their roots found no water and died. The ones that persevered were not high or dense enough to obscure the amalgamation of brown shingled roofs. They rolled with the low hills beneath a network of telephone wires, the poles upright with the dull pride of more efficient replacements to trees.

Somewhere in between the Sierras and the ocean, a satellite of satellites, surrounded by farms and jammed against foothills, this town had threaded itself on US 101 like waiting. In the mornings it sent out its people and in the nights it drew them home, strung like beads along the long dark freeway. I was waiting too. Trying to figure out what to do with this bird—the wrong kind of mystery.

I looked at the sky. Darker clouds were coming in from the northwest. Another storm. Not unheard of in July here, but rare. “It’s going to rain sooooon,” I said softly. I pushed open the window and already I could smell the distant burned-rubber smell of hot asphalt mixed
with wet earth. Colder air billowed in. Another storm bringing memories and sounds and smells from a whole other place, a whole other time.

I took the turkey dog and some carrot sticks out to the trailer. There was a man looking over the fence. His dark eyes only just visible.

“Hello,” said the little neighbor man, lifting his hand enough for me to see it.

Was he standing on something? He had to be. There was someone with him, too—a pair of pale eyes beneath a shock of graying hair peeping over the fence beside him. I only glimpsed them and then they were both gone. But I kept seeing the neighbor’s curious, round face—and those pale eyes next to him—and the look in their eyes of something like greed.

I hurried into my trailer.

“Someone called for you earlier,” Mom said at dinner, scraping up the last of her rice with her fork. It was the night before Pops’ memorial: she’d spent all day cleaning and fashioning little snacks to go on trays that now chilled in the fridge in cocoons of plastic wrap. She kept calling it a party, a celebration of life. She didn’t look up from her plate.

“Who?”

“Didn’t leave a name. Asked to speak to my daughter. Said they’d call back.” She sighed. “You should probably give people your cell phone number.”

“I do,” I said, annoyed.

“Well anyway, it must not have been important.”

I looked over at Dad, who had stopped eating halfway through a chicken breast. I looked at Mom with the thin spots in her fried-straight hair and Dad with the circles under his eyes that seemed to be from a deeper weariness than lack of sleep and I felt I couldn’t love
them anymore. Maybe I should go back to school, to the easy patterns. Maybe this was the only way I was allowed to be. Maybe there was something wrong with me and this is all I would know of it, this empty love, until it was too late.

I held this feeling like a hard cold egg inside the cage of my ribs. I almost wanted to say it. *I don’t think I can love you anymore.* It seemed like a terrible thing to say, but something about its terribleness made it also seem necessary.

I didn’t say anything. I did the dishes when Mom asked me to, reminding myself she had the right. She came to the sink when Dad had gone back upstairs and started drying dishes next to me.

“This isn’t normal,” she said. She trailed the yellow dishcloth over a plate and stared out the window, where the rain poured thick and biblical.

“It’s just El Niño.”

“No,” she said. “That’s not it.”

I remembered Mom as she had always been, a hard-edged woman yelling at us from the sidelines of whatever sport we happened to be playing, taking charge of who brought oranges and when, a self-appointed governor of not only our lives but the circles we moved in. She’d softened after Allie left. I was beginning to see the age in her face, the softness around the bone. The fallibility. The fall.

“I’m sure,” I said, “this is only some fluke.”

I went out early to my trailer and read for a while. But soon enough the crickets started up again despite the downpour—weren’t they supposed to quiet in the rain?—and I couldn’t read anymore and I lay there listening to the rain and the babble of the insects. Even when plugging my ears they raged inside my brain. A cricket shrilled near my window, so
close to me it might as well be curled in my ear. Suddenly it was so much easier to ignore the others. “Shut up.” I said.

_Wreeek._

“Shut up.”

_Wreeek._

I willed some slinking night hunter to eat it. Eventually, I think, one did.
George

George was always hungry. He’d grown accustomed to that gnaw at the pit of his stomach. He had enough to eat. It wasn’t that. The government checks got him by, though there wasn’t much cream to skim off the top. It was simply that nothing struck him as appetizing anymore. He ate mechanically, spooning beans onto a cold tortilla or frying a couple of eggs in the morning in whatever grease he had. Nothing satisfied. The ache never went away.

*Fine*, he thought. If that was the way it was going to be.

Maybe it was just an extension of the general lack hanging over him these days. When he’d been younger—much younger—he’d had energy. More than energy he’d had power. And he’d built things. Places for people to live and work inside. He had done well enough to earn this small piece of land among trees, which he loved best. There was no one around him to care. Penny had left for the last time a long time ago, taking with her the cancer that had eaten away inside of her until she was thin and empty as a glass bird.

He had very little to fill his days. He read old and famous books from the library, thick and heavy ones written to last, and worked on the Project, and kept his garden because gardens were what Penny had loved best. Even when she was well she would leave and come back and go off again and always she’d send him pictures of gardens from all over the country, all over the world, pictures without any words. Contrary to his ease with machines he was not a natural gardener—his callused thumbs weren’t green. They killed things more often than they nurtured them. But he was stubborn and he found satisfaction in it. Not like the Project, but the Project was a monstrous monument he built without surety, the understanding of it far beyond his reach. Gardening was a quiet battle. And it was a war he
waged with the animals that preyed upon his garden. The deer, the rabbits, the slugs, the
raccoons, the mice, the birds, the snails—but the deer most of all.

He thought about getting a dog. He went to the animal shelter on a Wednesday and
was the only one there. The kennels howled, a long tunnel of morose unhappy hounds.

“You sure you wouldn’t like a cat?” the lady said. “I’m a cat person myself. We just
got a litter of stray kittens, precious things, and none of them have homes yet.”

“I need a dog,” he said. “Thanks all the same.” The lady told him he could take one or
two over to the dog run, take them for a walk, accustom himself to their personalities. But
their eyes were all hungry and blank and sad to the bottom.

“I’d better go,” he said to the lady.

“Come with me first. I promise it won’t take a minute.”

It was much quieter in the cat room. Small quick animals, they stared through their
cages at him with wide watchful eyes. He liked it even less then the kennels.

“Here,” said the lady. “Adorable.” She opened one cage and reached into a squirming
tangle of fur and pulled one out and set it in his hands before he could say wait. The small
gray tabby scrambled in his hands, claws pricking like needles, oblivious to him and
whatever pain it caused.

So he got a cat. At least it could keep the smaller creatures away, and it would be
quiet, and not make demands upon his attention.

George was always hungry but the cat, at least, ate greedily and without partiality and
purred with satisfaction. She was not a personable cat, he found, which was fine. He chose
not to be a personable man. She came and went and faded into the background of the place
and he felt some regret he hadn’t gotten a dog after all. Something more vibrant, more alive
and urgent. But the thought of going back to that place made him sweat. The gray kennels. The lean and hungry jaws. Some strange gauntlet, hollow and spare, echoed inside of him.

The cat was small and safe and quiet. He could do with her company, and keep deer out of his garden himself. A new fence would do it—the heat and ache of physical labor would be good for him, remind him what his softening hands were still capable of. He had been unable to work on the Project for weeks but the thought of returning to it without being prepared, without focus, made his skin crawl chilly in the late glow of afternoon.

He sank his hands into an earth that rebelled against him. He fixed small things around the place so even if they weren’t as clean as they could be they ran as they ought to, all the small gears and cogs and cords sparking and humming as they should. The radiator ran silent and the water ran hot. He washed his cup and his bowl after each meal. He went to the store in town and bought cat food, oatmeal, and beans. In the meantime, the animals continued to plague his garden.

Also, something strange was going on in the woods.
5. Memorializing

Here’s the scene. Gray day in Atascadero. Cars parked along the curb and double in the driveway, verging on my dad’s front lawn (Not the grass, Dad mumbled, stirred to a moment of visible crisis when the guests started overflowing. Not in the rain.) But he had no heart left anymore. He sighed and let Mom take the tray of cheese cubes and crackers from him. I left him standing at the kitchen counter with the murky light over the sink enveloping him and tried to find somewhere out of the way.

“My dear,” my dad’s cousin Aunt Susie said, wrapping her arms around me and squeezing her plush chest between us. The combination of her cigarettes and vanilla perfume burned my nose and made my eyes water. She dug her fingernails into my shoulders and pushed away from me. “Look at you and you’re so grown up and what have you done to your hair. How is college? Meet any nice boys yet?” She looked around and lowered her voice. “Oh,” she whispered. “But I suppose… this isn’t the time or place, is it?” She patted my shoulders and head, shaking her head. “I’m so… sorry.” She smiled at me already moving toward the table of food. A sluggish stream of people crowded into our living room and overflowed into the dining room, maintaining official hush and gloom. I was honestly surprised so many had come. Many of these people I had not seen in years, and all of them lived far enough away to make excuses. Aunt Alice interrupted a muttered argument with her husband Jack to hug me without looking. Jack muttered hello. I said hello back.

“Hmm,” he said, and followed Alice.

There was a picture of Pops on the mantle and nobody looked at it except in passing. Occasionally someone would pause and say nostalgically to no one, “He looks so young,” although they had never known him that way. Pops was the last of his siblings, and Dad was
his only child. Everyone here was a niece or a nephew or a cousin of varying degree by marriage if not birth and maybe it was unkind of me to wonder if they were just here for the memory of their own parents. Pops was the last one, after all.

My home felt foreign to me. I’d lived most of my life in this place but I noticed for the first time it had acquired that mothballed distance old houses often had, a smell not like the smells homes were meant to have: a smell so much a part of you that everything still smelled the same when you walked in out of the world. Now it was the smell of the wrong food, the wrong colognes, the wrong people. The rain outside—the insidious sounds, the enclosure of this place—only made it worse.

I found refuge in the chair by the stairs between the bookshelf and the ficus plant, where I practiced my best chameleon pose, sinking into the pink and beige cushions. My eyes ached with the effort of keeping them open. Those crickets, those damn crickets. I’d nearly stepped on one rolling out of bed that morning. I caught it in one of the many empty water glasses I collected beside my bed—all lined up and gleaming with the morning light inside of them—and dumped it back outside so it could continue to torment me instead of squashing it like it deserved. There must have been something in the water. Something filling them with blind malicious joy demanding to be voiced.

“What’s wrong with you?”

I rolled my head to look at the little girl who’d appeared beside me. Four, maybe five. She watched me with preternatural gravity. She wore a frilly mess of a pink dress and shiny black Mary Janes with white socks—the kind of outfit I’d screamed and fought not to wear at that age—and had enormous blue eyes that were close to but not quite the blue-gray of Allie’s.
“Well,” I said. “For starters, Pops is dead.”

“Who’s that?”


“Oh,” she said. She sat down in the opposite chair, mirroring my posture—slumped, chin tucked, arms on the chair’s arms. “That’s a sad thing, huh.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Pretty sad.”

“I don’t like this party.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

Her mother swooped in and collected her and I was left alone again. Directly across from me were two paintings Mom had picked up in Monterey the previous year: one is of a seascape with a lighthouse, the other is of a cottage in the woods with smoke rising from the chimney. Loathing flooded me. They had nothing to do with this house, or this town, or anything we had ever done separately or as a family.

Next to me, the phone rang.

“Hello?” said the person on the other end, before I could say anything.

“Goodbye.” I hung up.

Some people.

After we had eaten and everyone was still wedged into the living room Dad stood up and cleared his throat. His skin was waxen and slick with sweat, a candle burning with a very dim light. “Thanks for coming,” he said. “I think… what we’d like is for everyone to say a few words, who wants to. What you remember about Dad, and the kind of man he was.” He kept swirling the scotch in his hand around in the glass.
“I’m happy to start,” said the man in the leather recliner. I didn’t know half of these people and when he stood up I didn’t recognize him at first: one of Dad’s cousins. Ralph or Roger, I couldn’t remember.

Dad hovered, sat.

“I remember,” Ralph/Roger said. “Uncle Chuck used to tell us stories of the war, and let us hold his Purple Heart, and even as a boy I knew—I was in the presence of a hero, a real hero. They don’t make them like that anymore. These boys they’re sending off to war now, it’s a farce, that’s what it is, and he’s talking, the room is deepening, he’s talking...

Sometimes,

when I listen to stories,

my head starts inventing

stories of my own that are bland and scraped bare of meaning,

that ought to be remembered if only to be never told,

and I start telling a story to myself

about a man or a woman or a canary unlike any they make anymore.
The problem is I don’t know how the story starts and I don’t know how it ends only how it keeps turning the same moment over and around again, again and again.

“No,” Dad said.

I surfaced. Mumu was leaning against my leg, chin on my knee, and I was stroking his fur. I felt a stupid sort of gratefulness. I wondered who had let him in. I looked around, but nobody was looking at me. They were all looking at Dad.

“No,” he said. “That’s not the kind of man he was at all.”

A cramped smile crept across Ralph/Roger’s face. “I’m sorry,” he said, but Dad cut him off.

“None of you knew him. How many of you visited those last few years? How many of you sent more than Christmas cards? How many of you loved him?”

Someone said, “Well. Did you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“Patrick,” Mom said, groping at the air in front of her as if to push him down, her face embarrassed and scared. “Pat, come on.”

“Listen,” Dad said. “Listen to me.” Everyone else sighed to their empty plates. “My father… my father…”

The thud was sharp and sudden, a kind of popping sound against the glass sliding doors to the backyard. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a dark comma fall—a feather drifted after it. Ralph/Roger stared—we all looked, startled and dumb. Dad’s face was red and blotchy but the substance had gone out of him. Without speaking he turned and went upstairs.
“Myna,” Mom said. No. “Myna.” She pulled her penciled eyebrows together and mouthed the word please.

“You’d better get that,” said someone in the doorway behind me.

I didn’t look back, not really. “Okay,” I said to Mom. No.

I got up. The blood drained from my head and I wavered and waited for the room to subside. No.

Ralph/Roger blinked at me. “Anyway,” he said. “Uncle Chuck was a good man.” People nodded. He sat. I went outside.

It was a sparrow. There was not a lot of variety in the local birds. It had broken its neck but there was no blood, only black eyes more glassy than they should be. I closed the sliding door maybe harder than necessary so it shivered on its runners and went to find the shovel propped up inside the storage shed. The smell of disuse was too thick to breathe. I checked the shovel over for black widows and carried it back. The metal grated against concrete as I scooped the bird up. I carried it around the side of the house, held out in front of me. The rain pattered down on both of us, faintly steaming. Through every window I passed I saw people sitting and listening to one person speaking. I spilled the bird into the trash and put the shovel back and went inside, shutting out the sound of the rain behind me. The dry quiet felt like someone’s hand had released my throat.

Now everyone looked at me.

“Myna,” Mom said after a moment. “Why don’t you speak.”

In that moment I could think of nothing. A distant Sunday rose and faded. Pops was a name and a face and an emptiness. He was a door that I looked through and saw nothing I recognized.
“No,” I said.

“Myna,” said Mom.

I stood there. I could think of nothing to keep my grandfather alive even in this transparent way. These blood strangers knew him better than me. They were doing what they were supposed to be doing. I was not. I didn’t know. I didn’t even know what I was supposed to do.

Faces peered around the doorway to the kitchen, murmuring to each other.

I was a child in front of all these people. I sat. Someone else stood. One by one they shared something of which I had no memory. I pushed cold mashed potatoes around on my dinner plate.

“To Charles Foster,” someone said, and we all held up our wine glasses and drank like it tasted different.

All my great-aunts and second cousins and friends of the family hugged me when they left. My arms ached with sudden weight. Some of them said something to my mom but for me they just smiled and said good luck. In college.

When everyone was gone Mom sighed and looked at me. “Help me clean up,” she said.

What else could I say? “Okay.”

I went from one room to the next picking up the things people had left by accident, and then going through with the vacuum to get the things they had left on purpose. When the phone rang again, I did not answer it. I was sick of the telemarketers and all their scams, sick of the ways people dug into my life to sell me something supposed to make it better.
“Shh,” I said. I stood there and listened to the house and its broad emptiness, the hum of the refrigerator, and the slow slosh of the dishwasher. There was nothing on the other side of the walls but the thickening night, the storm, and the grating symphony of crickets.

I thought I heard a bird singing. But when I went upstairs the canary was still only a quiet lump of yellow feathers. It regarded me through the bars of its cage as if to say I blame you too. I made sure it had food and left.

That night for the third night in a row I could not sleep. The crickets in the yard continued their ecstatic saga and I bathed sleepless and open-eyed in a pool of noise and rain in my trailer. I thought about Pops dying in the old yellow house with the oak tree and wondered if he really wanted it that way after all.

“Goddamn bugs,” I yelled. “Shut the hell up.” They only seemed to get louder. Even the bed I was on was made out of noise. The walls around me were made of noise. The air I breathed shivered in my lungs with tiny punctuations of sound.

Finally I got up and kicked open the door—it was sticky, always needed an extra wrench—and nearly stepped into the roiling mass of crickets. They had spilled out from hiding, too many of them for grass to hold—a dark glistening pool, their borders undulating and indistinct. Some of them sprang up from the rest like popcorn, a few flung themselves against my legs, and I realized what the pinging sound I had heard in the rain, what I had thought was the rain wasn’t just the rain, although the rain pushed against me and poured down the front of me, raining like it would never rain again. My back was still dry, but sticky threads of water wound their way down my neck.
Out of the corner of my life I saw a man-shape on the fence. I was dreaming, maybe. I blinked and it was gone again. It seemed it had been made entirely out of crickets. Or shadow really, because that’s all they were, one enormous organic shadow.

I felt sick. I turned around and went back inside my trailer and lay sleepless for long hours pretending I did not know what was outside.

Maybe it was the rain and maybe it was the memorial and maybe even somehow the crickets but Allie kept creeping into my mind. For the first months after she’d left that’s how I’d imagined her, creeping back into my life the way she’d crept out of it, sneaking out one rainy night while I was asleep. Allie and I had never been close. She was nine when I was born and I was nine when she left and nine years is a wide gap to overcome, for sisters. I was angry at her for a long time: angry for the way my parents fought about her, for the way her absolute absence fired the unfinished clay of our lives together. We never found out where she went, or why.

She always had a way of slipping through cracks. The way small kids will go limp and heavy when they don’t want to be picked up, arms straight up, and they slip—that was Allie.

For exactly three months I checked her room every morning to see if she’d come back during the night. Then I stopped forever.

I stopped looking out her window wondering which way she has gone. Peering over the edge I see that our yard has become a desert, dunes scraped up by a hot steely wind. It stretches for miles and the neighbors’ fences are distant lines against horizon. A rope hangs from the windowsill, the frayed end hissing against sand. I shrink back.
“It doesn’t matter,” the dog says beside me, peering out. “Anyway. I’m through wasting time with you.” He jumps.

I woke up.

It was very quiet.
6. The Morning

I went outside. The sky was clear and the sun was out. On the slick grass, in the morning heat, I felt like I was walking barefoot on the back of a sweaty animal. The crickets were gone. A few were still dying twitching or dead in the grass, but the flood of the night before had disappeared. I watched one kick in the mud, a quick convulsive jerk of the leg. There was another lying near my foot. I nudged it with my toes. It felt dry and papery but weighted still with fading life.

I ran up to the house, eyes on the grass, stepping quick and light. If I could, I would not have touched the ground at all.
I returned to Paris via Moscow today. The steppes linger in my mind—the bleak openness of them still something I hold inside of me. They seem like something that should be familiar to me, like some frozen memory of a past life. I imagined great herds of woolly mammoth and aurochs and other enormous forgotten creatures, moving like mist across the landscape. The people I met kept to themselves. I was just another glowing-eyed creature on the outside of the fire, looking in.

Returning, Moscow’s dense array of lives and low-lidded history thundered into me. Then Paris, with its twisting stone alleys and wide tree-lined boulevards. I stood under the Eiffel Tower—all lit up in the night—and thought of the Seine steps away, rolling darkly to the sea.
George

George had been listening and watching and watching and listening. He had lived here long enough to know the differences in the night sounds, to tease them apart as coyote. Deer. Owl. Tree falling deep in the woods, the harsh and distant sound of tumbling stone. These sounds had settled into him as a familiar discourse. But of late new sounds had been introduced among them, woven like smoke among trees. New pulses in the patterns of traffic on the highway. New mutterings in the shadows, trailing through the hollows of this rolling woodland. It unsettled him, not knowing why he felt unsettled.

That evening when the sun hung strawberry-swollen below the line of trees, he went deeper into the woods than he’d gone in a long while. He’d never known trees like the redwoods for gathering sound and emanating silence—the spongy auburn carpet of fallen needles and decaying bark was centuries thick and absorbed his footsteps into whisper. Yet the cry of a hawk—the hawk absent from view—struck his ear like an arrow. So much weighted air between him and the lowest branches of the trees, darker where the trees thickened, each thick furred stalk competing for sunlight high above fiddleneck ferns and red huckleberry bushes and fuzzy clover and the small white blossoms of false lily-of-the-valley.

He came upon them without meaning to. Five of them in the dusk: men and women with shining youthful but imperfect bodies. They swam naked in a wide bend in the creek, one of the many veins of water that fled the mountains unnoticed to the sea. Startled he made a noise, catching at the bushes as he would to warn an animal.

“Welcome,” said one of the men, standing in the shallows and spreading out his arms. Half of his head was shaved and hair hung in his eyes. His nudity and his laughter mocked George equally. “Welcome to the original place.”
One of the women peered his way and then waved unselfconsciously. Her entire body was densely freckled and that disconcerted him more than her nudity—like reading a book all at once, beginning and end.

Hollow, George turned and walked back the way he had come. Some small part of him recognized his exclusion by age and other reasons. “I hope we haven’t offended you!” one shouted after him with heated glee.

His way as he made it back was unsteady. Something had shifted in these woods without him knowing it. Something foreign had entered and driven roots into the soil he had counted his.

Instead of home he walked to the Project. As long as it remained untouched, unfound, the integrity of this place, his place, did as well. He feared now it was threatened.

The Project was an enormous sculpture of a beast half-finished, gleaming in rust and bronze and copper wire, ferns and mushrooms nesting in the pockets deepening dark. It resided in a shallow sink that might once have been the bed of a colossal redwood, about a fifteen minute walk from his house. He wasn’t sure who owned the land it was on—the government or some logging company, maybe—but the woods around the Project had gone undisturbed for decades. It hadn’t changed much since he’d last visited—some of the plants and moss had thickened, and new blooms had replaced the old. A blanket of white flowers near the base on the west side glowed pink in the setting sun.

“Hello,” he rasped, voice thick with phlegm. He cleared his throat and the sound cracked sharp in the clearing. Nothing moved except a low furred creature slinking into shadow. He’d gone to church with his family as a boy, but no religious experience had ever matched how he felt in this clearing. There was something holy here.
He sat until it was almost too dark and then walked back in the cold, his feet more
knowing of the path than his eyes had ever been.
7. I’ve Come to See It’s Time to Go

She tried to be helpful about the crickets, of course, came out in her tan bathrobe and looked around the mucky remnants of the pond and commented about how we really needed to do something about the backyard, it was getting away from us, and was I really sure I was comfortable in that old trailer? “Mom,” I told her. “Bugs.” She kept looking at the trailer, her expression troubled and soft. I thought if I could mold the tired clay of her face into a stronger person I would. Her eyes were a wet gray brown. I thought of them as sparrow-colored and I thought of the bird that died against our window the day before and I remembered I’d forgotten to take the trash can out to the curb like I was supposed to. It bothered me more than it should have.

So I went around the house and got the trash, opening the gate to wheel it to the curb. Looking up and down the street I saw other dark green canisters lined up like enormous mailboxes waiting to be emptied and filled again. The storm had passed almost as though it had never happened. In the new heat Mom’s roses drooped and sulked, lined up like unhappy kindergarteners along the front of the house, far from the places they were supposed to grow. The unremarkable house in which my parents lived, and I had grown up, brooded too.

The little man next door was mowing his lawn. He had an old lawnmower that kept bucking on lumps of turf and cutting out but he kept grimly on, exactly parallel to the sidewalk. I hurried inside before he saw me and entered to hear the phone ringing.

“Hello,” said the person on the other end. “I’m calling about a bird. I heard you might have one for sale?”
Something about his voice was familiar. I twitched the curtain above the sink open with my fingertips but the little neighbor man was still out there. His obstinacy fascinated me despite my dislike.

“What kind of bird?” I said.

The man paused. “Any kind, really,” he said. “I just want a pet bird. I think it would be nice to have a pet bird.”

“You’re Pops’ lawyer, aren’t you.”

The dial tone stretched out—my vindication. I hung up and, uneasy, went upstairs to check on the bird. I passed Dad sitting on the couch. The dog was with him. Dad slowly petted the dog’s head, while the dog watched me with big drooping eyes. As though thinking, What are you still doing here.

The bird flapped its wings a few times as I entered, like it would either lose its balance or attack me. Another tiny feather drifted to the bottom of the cage.

“Ugly aren’t you? I don’t even know if you are a he or a she,” I said. “Unless you sing.” Apparently only the male birds sang.

I waited. The bird fluttered down to the seed tray.

“You’re a strange bird,” I told it. “I don’t like you. I can’t imagine who would want you.”

The bird ate, primly. “I don’t like you,” I said again. The bars of its cage a wall between us.

A Memory:

When I was five we went to a zoo. Somewhere. Maybe the zoo in one of the cities, I don’t remember. It seemed big as a jungle to me then. All those tricks they use
to make zoos feel more like real places for the animals: they work on small kids too. The wet warm air in the tropical bird cage, the recorded chirps of strange birds. The hoots of the owls in the nocturnal section. The real plants next to the plants painted on rocks.

The lion paced up and down behind a chain link fence. “Guess what, Myna-bird,” Mom said. “That lion has the same birthday as you. He was born right here in this zoo.” I leaned against the bars outside the fence. I imagined I felt something like a roar inside of me. I’m a lion. A lion is me.

“This is stupid,” Allie said.

Oh, Allie.

In the yard below I saw Mom around the corners of the yard with the rake. It wasn’t fall yet but the sycamore tree littered large crisping star-shaped leaves year-round—she scraped unenthusiastically at these, pausing occasionally to prod the rake at the overgrown bushes. Watching Mom look at the garden I could see how much work it needed, how much more time by comparison they must spend on the front yard.

All the backyards in the world withering into desert. All of my grandfather’s stories gone. Only a yellow bird left.

Something was rising inside of me like a new planet—a pressure, a sensation of worlds. I needed to go to the city. I needed to get rid of this bird in the right way instead of letting it fade away like everything else. Like my father, like Mumu, like Pops, like the crickets, like Allie—all these broken endings.
Mumu came in and started sniffing, wedging his nose between boxes. He seemed especially curious about the bird.

“Come on,” I said, nudging him with my foot. “Get out of here.”

He regarded me with such betrayal that I blurted out, “I don’t have to do it.”

The dog shrank back and whined.

“I don’t know what that sound means,” I said. “Get out of here.” I shooed him out and shut the door behind me.

The phone rang. Apparently no one in this house answered it anymore so I picked it up again, resigned to the fact it would not be for me.

“I’d pay a good price for that bird,” the lawyer said. “More than you’d get anywhere else.”

“It’s a cockatiel,” I said. “And it’s not for sale.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not selling the bird to you, so stop calling.” I hung up, and called Clary before I could allow myself to reconsider.

I did want to care. Especially if no one else did.

“Clary” I said. “I need a ride to the bus stop tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“I need to go up to the city.”

“My na, I have to go to work in the morning.”

“A friend needs some help with a project she’s doing. An activism project.”

“A friend.”

“You can drop me off on your way. You owe me.”

I felt the pull of gravity sliding from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. It wasn’t too late to close the door upon that room full of boxes and stop caring. It wasn’t too late to catch myself and haul myself back up over the ledge I peered over now. And I thought maybe if I knew what my actions would accomplish I could fall without thinking. But nobody was going to tell me.

I felt the rush of wind streaming up from the ground, pulling my hair toward the sky. My heart and stomach and all the rest of me falling and my toes caught at the edge and released.

When I left I got the bird first from my old bedroom, surrounded by boxes of things I had made when I was little, that Allie had made, things we had bought and forgotten. All those old Christmases. Those old yearnings. I’d cleaned the old cage and now dismantled it and stuffed it into my backpack. The bird went into a travel carrier. I still had not heard it sing.

I had been up since five, watching the milky moonlight track and fade across the carpet. The house was large and creaking at night and held broad unfamiliar slabs of shadow. Now the sunrise reached thin gray hands into corners, tangling the rooms in a web of gathering light. I walked first by my parents’ room where Mom slept alone, the sound machine pouring out an artificial waterfall around the edges of her closed door. She could not sleep anymore, she claimed, without it.

The next room was Dad’s office, Allie’s old room, where he had taken to sleeping on the couch surrounded by the books he collected for so many years. I’d never understood his
prosaic hobbies but there was something about the smell of paper and leather and ink that got me even as a child. Something about the weight of all that knowledge.

Seven titles on the bookshelves of my father:

1. *An Ethnography of the Peoples of the Americas*
2. *Al Terra, La Terra*
4. *Socrates and the Devil*
5. *Ten Years at Sea*
6. *Musings on the Nature of Beauty*
7. *In the Place of Forgotten Things*

Mumu had kept watch with me all morning, stretched out on the rug by the window, his ears perking at every nighttime noise as headlights swept across the walls. Yet he kept his distance from me even now as he followed me from room to room. I thought he’d taken to me as I had begun to take to him but he seemed just an animal now, and indifferent. “You’re the only mystery I can’t take with me,” I told him. I had the *Dear George* card in my backpack.

Mumu sniffed at the duffle bag and then curled up near the window again, his back empty to me.

There was a strangeness and a sadness in the bones of this family. I didn’t want to be a part of it anymore. I left my note on the table by the door. I did not think about Allie. She wasn’t the same as me.
“Bye,” I whispered to the emptiness of the house.

The air outside was soft with the promise of later heat. Clary’s car idled against the curb, exhaust billowing upwards. I opened the door, brushed bent paper clips off of my seat, slung my backpack into the back and got in. I carefully set the carrier on my lap inside its unzipped duffle and shut the door. My heart unclenched.

“What’s that?” Clary said, tossing another twisted clip into the backseat and nodding toward the bag on my lap. Probably not the best way to be transporting a bird but it seemed to be okay.

“My superhero costume,” I said. “Sha-bam.”

Her only response was a sigh.

The streets were vast and cool like rivers. Streetlights bathed the sidewalks in a buttery yellow glow. Windows of houses shone with the wakeful. The quiet suburb I had grown up in was rising. Same as any other day. And that was the house where my friend Sean had lived, and there where my friend Arielle—though of course friend still means so many things and I wish I could share in my inflection the way I felt when Sean stopped talking to me in the third grade because boys didn’t play with girls and later when Arielle started peremptorily trying to shape me into something more like the friend magazines told her she should have.

There where I’d fallen on my bike and broken my arm. There where I had thrown a rock at a stranger’s car for running over a squirrel. There where I’d waited for the bus. I’d hated waiting for that bus so much I could almost see a ghost of myself standing there at the corner. Waiting. For who knows what.
“Remember,” Clary said, pointing, “that filthy little ditch?” In junior high she’d steal her mom’s cigarettes and we’d go down to the creek lost in the tangled patch of weeds and scrubby trees we now were passing and she would smoke them and complain about boys while I listened. Now a sign had been planted in the weeds by the corner. *Pinecrest Homes*, it said. *A Redwing Development Project. Luxury 2-3 Bedroom Condos.* I felt a pang of nostalgia for a time I’d never thought I miss.

“If you really wanted to fix something,” Clary said. “If you really want an ‘activism project’… why the hell don’t you stay here and fix all this?” She gestured at the field, the dense scrubby trees marking the line of the creek.

I imagined we probably had different ideas of what fixing it would mean.

“Someone else will figure this one out.”

Clary dropped me off at the bus stop—a parking lot next to the chamber of commerce—just as the sun spilled over the rim of the hazy eastern hills. Her gaze already somewhere else.

“Bye, Clary,” I said, scrambling out. A few more paper clips rattled out with me and I didn’t bother to retrieve them. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “Call me sometime.”

When at last the slick dark bus pulled in I gave the driver my ticket and moved to a seat near the back. I stuck the cage down between the window seat and the seat in front and hid it behind my backpack and sweatshirt.

“Hey,” said the woman across the aisle from me, her hair bottle-blond. At the look on my face the woman slid back and away, muttering to herself.
When my phone rang later with my mother’s number I ignored it. Three minutes after it buzzed.

_Going back so soon? No goodbye?_

The woman across from me had moved and there was a new person across the aisle, a dark old man with a ribbed neck. He had a birthmark on his chin, a patch of lighter skin. He watched me. I pretended not to notice.

_Sorry,_ I responded.

_You left all your things. Something wrong?_

_No._

_Are you coming back for your stuff?_

_Not until break._

_We should talk about this._

I didn’t respond.

Another text. _Exclusive offer: Brownhill red-tag sale, only for Brownhill Cardmembers! 25%, 50%, 75% off all ladies fashions!_

The phone rang again and I turned it off. I didn’t need to talk to Mom. Not when I finally felt like I was getting somewhere.
You, Again

You are the collector.

You begin early today. Astride your bike you kick down streets, dodging parked cars, veering up driveways and shooting off curbs. Count them. One two three four *five* blue cars in a row, all of them but one shiny fresh-washed. You ride down to the bus stop, past the bakery that always smells like donuts in the morning and maybe you’ll get one later. You watch her go: this lady with the bag with the hidden bird inside it. She’s leaving from the sixth blue car, walking away. You can tell she has a bird in her bag just by the way she holds it, the loneliness that curves around her and the bag, too.

Something falls to the ground she jumps from the car—sparks that jangle and gleam, and you, the collector, swoop in like a magpie and snag them, scooting past before she notices. Twisted paper clips in perfect shapes. The best thing you have found today.

Her friend, the sunflower woman—you notice these things—peels out and you pedal as hard as you can, your legs churning to follow. Your image pedals in all of her mirrors. Just as you get close enough to touch the back of the car—just as you do—she zooms ahead, her car clouding you in stink-smoke.

You win. You go for a donut. It tastes like sweetness. For a moment there is nothing in this world but sweetness, sticky on your fingers. It consumes you.

You bike past a park where a golden retriever runs loose. His person is talking to a woman in green so you are free to play together. You throw sticks for him and he brings them back to you. You’ve always liked dogs. They pay attention to you when no one else does. They are full of wiggling and loving happiness at being dog. You wish you could have a dog to be your friend. Dogs like you but they always have other people to take care of.
You bike down the middle of a road between skeleton houses. The signs all say New and Coming Soon. You take one sign small enough for you to carry under one arm. It has a picture of a hammer on it. You’ll add it to your collection.

You are the world’s first explorer. There is nothing closed to you.
On the Bus

When you’re trapped on a bus like I’m trapped on that bus and there’s nowhere to go and you’re hiding a bird in the proverbial back pocket oh there are so many things that can go wrong between the blur on either side of the window: the constant interstate rumble, the heavy morning heat of late summer in the valley, the sunburnt glare of littered cans by the wayside and the slow men in orange vests accumulating them, the neverending *swoop-swoop-swoop* of powerlines and jagged buttressed walls, the dusty green-black of the oleander bushes and their pink and white flowers doomed to freeways forever, peeled black strips of giant black tires, the scuttled remains of old cars and broken furniture and accidental produce, the farms and the hills and the dense clusters of new homes with their faces turned away from the long river of exhaust and steel and distanced faces set grim or slack. Thoughts anywhere but here. Between all this in the air-conditioned twilight we cruise—the bus newer and finer than all of us ragged people. A child peeks over the back of the seat in front of me, picking his nose. His mother wears a scarf over her head so purple I am jealous of a color for the first time. To my left the old man hunches over the San Francisco *Chronicle*,
chin level with chest, nose buried in newsprint. Behind him the blond rinse woman from earlier glares at everyone, not just me. I make faces at the kid but he regards me with the wide uncomprehending stare of all children. The skinny guy behind me, mohawk and acoustic guitar, decides he wants to write a song for me. I make the brief mistake of being polite. The song goes: “Myna, Myna Myna, you’re so fine, Myna Myna.” My face burns the whole way, with the bird inside the bag rustling and then going so quiet I worry it’s dead. Then what would be the point of any of this? Myna, Myna Myna.
8. How to Get Lost on the Interstate

“Excuse me.”

No.

“Excuse me.”

The woman who had paused next to me on her third trip back up the aisle from the bathroom—elderly, with skin slack as a deflated balloon—leaned over and drowned me in a cloud of gardenia-laced perfume.

“I thought I heard something. Do you hear something?”

“No.”

“What do you mean?” said the man across the aisle. “What what what do you mean?”

He sat up shaking, gray hair and beard tangled in his voice. “Is there something on the bus?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, but the woman, encouraged, began hunting nearby seats.

“No,” she said. “No, it’s definitely something.”

The rustling resumed and I willed it to stop.

Silence.

Be silence.

Please.

“No,” said the woman, looming over me again. “It’s definitely coming from over here.” But she wasn’t looking at the bag with the bird in it. She was looking at me.
“No,” I said.

What happened next:

- The woman went up to the bus driver and stabbed a blunt finger at me.
  - The bus driver, thick lips twisting, pulled over and snarled at her to sit down.
    - “It’s a snake, it’s a mouse,” said the old man across the way.
- Her voice took wing, shredded the air of the bus.
  - My stomach curdled.
- Driver: “Alright, so you got something alive on my bus?”
  - “It’s a rat, it’s a roach,” said the old man across the way.
- Me: “Uh.”
  - The bird scuttled in its box and chirped, once.
    - The bus driver’s voice grew ugly with violence. I had upset some balance. I had ruined some day.
- “What’s in there,” he said, “A shit-ass bird?”
  - “It’s not diseased or anything. Can’t we just keep going?”
- “Let me see,” said the woman, grabbing for the box. “Let me see.”
  - I lunged too late. The bird sputtered up, yellow panic, and an ugly cry scrabbled among the bus riders, an evil leaning hunting want.
    - “You—off. Off my bus. Right here.”
- The bird flew out and away, sucked it seemed through the open door, and all I could do was run after it.
They left me in the parking lot of a McDonalds in King City. I sat on the curb for a long while, drenched in the grease-smell of french fries. I didn’t know what to do. I stared at the sky and waited.

“Come back,” I said. “Please.”

Two children towed by an unloving mother stared at me, the way you stare at people shouting prophecies on street corners, the ones you pity because you know, with all certainty—they’re wrong.

Then I saw the bird foraging in the bushes, and I acted for the first time without thinking in my life. I followed it.

Like many towns in this part of the state, King City was built by lettuce and strawberries. Every time I passed through it seemed to have grown: it had a Starbucks now, and three freeway exits, and a highway patrol station. Immediately outside the town the fields began and I followed the bird into these fields, squinting against the low sun through the flat-bottomed valley. To the east the hills were low, dusty, treeless. To the west the hills were golden, studded with the dark tufts of oak trees, clustered beetlelike in the grooves.

“Bird,” I called after it. “Dear George.” The only name I had for it—him.

He could have fluttered away. He could have outdistanced me in a heartbeat—swallowed by the sky and gone. But I followed him, a darting yellow speck, and he let me keep him in sight. We played a strange game of cat and mouse for a long time. I followed him through fields, past a group of migrant workers loading cabbages onto a truck. They slowed to stare. “Sorry,” I said. “Sorry, my bird.”
To run down the furrows I had to adjust my stride, run light-footed and narrow and place my feet exactly where they needed to go. *If I could lift my feet a touch higher, I thought, I’d be flying.* With one hand I held my backpack strap tight against my hip. With the other I held the carrier out to one side. It flapped in the wind, twisting in my hand like it too wanted to fly.

I passed more workers picking strawberries.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Excuse me.” I steered clear of the scarlet bubbles of fruit. The sharp scent of wet strawberry leaves stung my nose. They watched me out of their sweatshirt hoods, saying nothing.

I passed a broad tractor. The driver, ten feet up, didn’t see me until I was running away. Consumed in the noise of his machine, whatever reaction he gave I couldn’t hear. I passed a house with a backyard full of llamas. The llamas watched me and chewed. I passed a car tilted into the ditch by the road, an orange sticker pasted to the windshield.

I ran and ran and still I could not catch the bird. I followed him through a trailerpark on the outskirts of town, one strangely deserted by its residents except for the old woman watching me from the shade of her doublewide. “Hey,” she croaked at me from her square of fake turf. “Hey, you trespassing!”

To which I ran faster, chasing the bird. It occurred to me all adventures had to be trespassing now. Was there no ground someone did not have some kind of claim on?

Dear George darted in front of me. Yellow spots in my eyes.

I didn’t know what to do if I didn’t catch him. The only plans I had required a bird, this bird. So I pursued him on into the declining afternoon as the light thickened with dust
and turned the world gold. In this light it seemed there were no more fields, no more of the shapes of people carved into the spaces we’d left behind.

That desert was long and low and impossible. I felt like I’d been there before. I felt it aching into me. This is what the world was becoming. This is what it would be like when I was gone, when we were all gone, wiped from the page, blank space again and gone.

The light faded and I faded too, back into my private loss.


Dirt swirled up into tiny devils and dissipated.

When I lost sight of the bird at last I cried stupidly at the edge of some nameless road, a strip of dirt between two fields, the city gray and hazy in my view. I didn’t like feeling lost. I didn’t like feeling scared. It wasn’t being on my own that bothered me, but the realization that I’d lost the safety net I was accustomed to—transportation, phone numbers, landmarks. I had none of that here.

But I could call my mother, I knew, and she would come.

One truth can make the whole lie feel different.

I didn’t stand there long. There were too many reasons for me not to stay out here when it got dark, too many ugly, violent reasons. So I gave up before I had even started and walked back toward town. I couldn’t even bend a few rules to get a bird where I wanted him to go. All I could do was chase after him. All I could do was try to keep him in the box and then, when I failed, go home.
I asked a woman at the gas station—the first and sometimes only sign of civilization—where the nearest bus station was.

She looked at me, and glanced over at the convenience store, then back. The two kids in the back of her car staring at me through the glass, their hands smashed against it like greasy starfish. “If you don’t know,” I said, “That’s fine.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t help you.”

I could tell by the way she didn’t meet my eyes: I’d been infected with desperation. With too much of the wrong kind of want.

The gas station attendant gave me directions. I walked all the way down Broadway—past the 7-Eleven, past the high school, the True Value, the bank, the library, a number of Mexican restaurants and markets and tortillerias. I carried the box in one hand and my backpack over my shoulder. Nobody really looked at me in more than passing. I felt myself sinking into this place the longer I stayed—sinking into the shallow dust of the streets, into the squat small-windowed buildings, into the steel-grated doors that slid shut as I passed, into the occasional dying tree.

There are thousands of streets like this one, hundreds of towns. We are the desert at the brim of the world, lifted dripping from the Pacific, our fog-drenched trees and salt-parched deserts.

I say our like I feel I belong. Really, everything I’ve ever seen belongs to someone else. Nothing I’ve seen belongs to me.

Maybe my shoes.

So, decided: I’ll stare at those.
I bought a ticket home at the station and moved to sit on a bench and felt better. Even if I was not supposed to be here at least I was going somewhere. Even if it was not where I wanted to go it was familiar. It would be...

Fine, I guess.

These are the things I could do with my life (assuming plague, nuclear war, and cosmic devastation postpone themselves):

1) Graduate from college with a 3.5 GPA (or thereabouts, I’m not picky).
2) Get a job that requires knowing the alphabet, knowing how to be decent to other people preferred.
3) Get married and raise two children in a house we purchase in a neighborhood with less character but nicer lawns than most.
4) Eat well, exercise, and choose a way to die.

Because it wouldn’t be so bad.
Because all the rewards can still be found inside this compartmentalized life. Because I am not cut out of the cloth of explorers. Because I am not cut out of the cloth of fighters. Because I have never wanted to climb mountains or dive in deep oceans or string my life out on the knife edge of someone else’s night. Because I’m afraid this is the only way I can be happy.

Then: I saw out of the corner of my eye a small blur of yellow and my heart twisted because to be honest this wasn’t something I had considered. I was already picking out the color of my house, the proportions of my lawn.

Shame I had not tried hard enough.
Shame it had taken so little.

The bird perched on the other end of the bench, an exotic punctuation mark on the shuttering afternoon. He might have been watching me—I didn’t look. I sat there with the box on my lap and ignored him and waited. He flutter-hopped closer, almost close enough to touch.

“Did you know,” I said, “Pigeons are capable of finding their way home without any memory of the places between? Scientists don’t even know how they do it.”

The canary lifted a wing and nibbled at the feathers underneath.

“Aren’t you a bird? Why can’t you fly home, then, and save us both the trouble?”

He continued to preen, fluffing up his motley feathers. So I picked up the box, and—slowly, giving him plenty of time to change his mind—lowered it over him.

I went to the ticket window and told the woman working there I wanted to change my ticket to San Francisco. She muttered under her breath but gave me the ticket and I went back to the bench and sat with the canary in my lap.

I think I was grinning.

“I guess you do need me after all, huh. Dear George.”
Memory #1

My grandfather was not particularly tall, but he was strong. He had long ropy arms and gnarled hands you wouldn’t expect to be good at piano, but somehow those knobby fingers knew how to float, how to follow the music into resonance.

It was one of the last times my parents dropped me off at Pops’ house—not long after Allie left, when they fought a lot. They never looked at me directly anymore. I was a ghost in my own house. A nine-year-old ghost. I didn’t know how to deal with it. I didn’t know how to talk to Pops, who was fading too: in recent years the jovial, gray-haired man I remembered had withdrawn. There was very little of him left. I only saw it when he played the piano, or if I happened to walk in front of him when he was sitting in his chair, gazing out the window and thinking. It felt like stepping suddenly into a slow-moving river. The cold shapes of fish slipped around me. Riverweed tangled around my ankles. The thick current of air rushed through me and then I was through, left in the spare stale air of the house Pops had lived in for so long.

Whatever Pops was seeing, it wasn’t the ordinary spaces.

I wanted to love the old man but I didn’t know how. I wanted to take care of him but I also wanted nothing to do with him. I didn’t want to catch whatever disease hung over him. I didn’t want to know about it. So I kept quietly to myself in the living room, and sometimes he came in and played the piano.

That day I was sitting underneath the piano, reading. I liked it down there because it felt like a cave, and because I’d taken to hiding when the world felt too wide and scary. Pops came and sat at the keyboard and started to play, and the sound resonated around me so close I could hear the minute thuds of the felt hammers striking the strings, the individual ripples
of sound, the slight wooden squeaks of the internal mechanism, the muffled knocking of the
pedals as he stepped on one, took his foot off, stepped on another.

Abruptly he stopped. The song died away in the hollowness around me and I held my
breath, because something felt wrong. Something felt like ending.

“That’s not the way it goes,” he mumbled. “That’s not the way it goes.”

“Pops?” I said in a small voice, because adults confused me but I still believed they
were usually right. And I heard a woman say, directly over me, sitting on the piano—“Keep
playing.”

I remember my dreams as much as I do my memories. Sometimes, it’s hard to tell
them apart.

But I’m certain this next part really happened: my grandfather leaned down to look at
me, the shadows falling slantwise on his face, diffusing it into something unfamiliar.

“My na,” he said. “Promise me something.”

“Okay,” I said.

“When you find something you love, hold on tight. Or you’ll lose it and never find it
again.”

I didn’t say anything. I was afraid to.

“Promise,” he said. “It will haunt you.”

“Okay,” I said.

He grunted, satisfied. He kept playing, though the notes didn’t seem to come so easily
as before, and I left to go read in sunlight, away from the strange echoes of my cave.
9. Don’t Forget Your Heart in the Overhead Compartment

I arrived in San Francisco in the blur of headlights, the air thick with cold fog and traffic. I had trouble breathing. The earth simmered in the streetlights, the pavement patchwork wet and gleaming. I smelled the sharp chemical odors of exhaust, of asphalt slick with the city’s sweat, the leavings of humanity caught in the corners, and over all of it the smell of the sea drifting in like the memory of a deeper, wider place.

Here in the business district: the angled light, the hard wonder. My shoes were not enough to protect the soles of my feet. Sweat stung in the back of my neck. Here, now. I was not yet and no longer where I was supposed to be. I slumped against a wall outside the bus station, not far from the gray jaws of the Bay Bridge.

I called Ruby. “I’m here,” I said, my throat taut.

“What?” she said. Voices churned in the background at both her end and mine.

“Yeah, set those down there.”

“I’m here,” I said again. “In the city.”

“No, bundle them with the fliers. The city? Myna?”

“I need a place to stay,” I said. “I want to help you with your project. And I can… you know. Reimburse you.”

More than anyone else I knew Ruby liked to matter. Helping others gave her a visceral thrill that wasn’t quite altruistic but came close enough. It pained me less to ask her for a favor than it would if I asked someone else.

“No need,” she said, directly into the phone this time. “There’s plenty of room. We’ll set you up. This will be great.”
Where Clary was gloomy, Ruby was bright. To her there was nothing that could not be made right. I was glad there were people like that in the world. I was not one of them.

“I’m at a fundraiser right now,” she said. “But Jagger’s there. He’ll let you in. Take the 6. Or the 71. Get off at Pierce. You remember?” Jagger was the boyfriend I hadn’t met yet. It was also the name of their chinchilla. I assumed she meant the former.

“I don’t want to be in the way.”

“As if you could be.”

I walked until I found a sign with the right bus route on it. I carried the bird at my hip with all the grace I could summon.

*Look*, the buildings said to each other, over me. *Look*, the streetcars and taxis said to each other, past me. *Look*, said the brisk legs of the people around me, carrying them to the places they fit, as well as the meanderings of legs with nowhere to go. *Look*, said the trees, carefully gardened. *Look*, said the storm drains and the seagulls and the sky. *Look*, said the dirty toothless man on the corner in a beetleshell of rags. *Look*, said the clusters of pre-teen girls with their pink Hannah Montana backpacks. *Look*, said the tourists with their sleek silver cameras. *Look*, said the familiar places shoved into unfamiliar spaces—McDonalds, the Gap, Wells Fargo. *Look*, said the crumbling edges of old buildings with shining new hardwood floors. *Look*, said the litter in the gutters, the stubs of cigarettes.

*Listen*, said the sea.

I knocked.

I knocked, and a man fell dead at my feet.

It had nothing to do with me. He was across the street outside a bright-lit restaurant and I didn’t even know what had happened at first. There was an unsettled motion in the
thick pedestrian traffic, like each person was a record that had begun to skip at different times. A cluster of people grew around him and the ambulance slid in, flickering. There is something startling about the colors red and white together but they were quick about it. Someone had retained their state of mind and a human sense of decency. The urgency in the air rose to a point just below boiling and then faded. The ambulance carried the fallen man away and the crowds dispersed. I asked a woman nearby what had happened. “I don’t know,” she said. “I think he’s dead.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she said, and walked off.

My hands were shaking. I went into the nearest coffee shop and got a cup of water. At the bus stop I sat on the curb with the bird on my lap. Dear George was not happy with me. He looked disheveled but very much whole and yellow.

“Look at you,” said a woman peering down and around me. Even at this distance she smelled musty, like clothes left out in the rain too long. She took a few steps closer. “You’re so beautiful.” Shuffled closer. “I like your sweater.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“I like your bird, too.” She extended one roughened finger toward the bird in his cage on my lap, clearly visible inside the open duffel. “He’s beautiful too.”

“Thanks,” I said, watching one of the tossed fast food wrappers near her feet shifting back and forth. It took me a moment to recognize what was animating it. She saw me looking.

“They live in the sewers,” said the woman. “Those frogs?” She laughed—her teeth and gums too wet. “They come out when it rains. Them and the wormy worm worms. All the
time.” Her face went stony. “You’d better watch out. You’d better watch out or they’ll eat him right up.”

“Thanks. Good to know.”

She beamed and turned to a round-bellied man waiting on the other side with the distant *occupado* expression businessmen refine quickly when the details of their job are nothing anyone ever asks about with real interest. “You are beautiful,” she said to him. “Such a smart, handsome jacket. Look at you.”

Ideas I have had about beauty:

1. Re: *beauty is in the eye of, etc.*, the beholder is shaped as much by the consistent reinforcement of (sub)cultural prejudices as anything so doesn’t it all comes back to the same thing anyway?

2. Beauty is one of those words used so much I hardly know what it means anymore. A car can be beautiful. A place without cars can be beautiful too. Love. Love is another word like that.

3. I like the word *honesty* better. Although it might not get you as far in life.

4. I can count the number of sunrises I’ve watched on my fingers and toes. This includes the one I saw leaving home that morning. The sunsets are innumerable.

5. The most beautiful thing I ever saw I’m sure I’ve forgotten, because I didn’t have the ability to recognize it when I saw it. I’m sure of that too.

I got off the 6 and headed briefly west, then north. Ruby and Jagger’s apartment was in the Lower Haight, the Haight-Ashbury’s slightly grungier neighbor. I’d been there once
when Ruby had been living with another roommate and I knew the way more or less by sight. Their building was two floors of apartments above a nail salon, now closed—one of those ubiquitous sherbet-colored San Francisco homes, this one was painted an eggy shade of gray-yellow. I stood outside the iron door and tried to remember which apartment to buzz. 201? 202? I took a chance and pressed one.

The door did not click open. I was about to push the other one when a voice overhead said, “Myna?”

I leaned back and stared into moon-bright sky. Someone leaned out of the second floor window, silhouetted by stars and looking straight down at me, and I don’t know where my surprise came from. I flinched.

“Hang a sec,” he said—a male voice—and disappeared. Moments later the door buzzed and let me in. I went up a narrow flight of stairs twisting on itself and paused halfway up at two doors. The right one swung open.

“Hey,” Jagger said, holding out a hand. “I’m Jagger.”

Some people don’t quite inhabit the space they move in. Most of the time, their mind is elsewhere. Jagger was not one of those people. His hazel eyes were direct and guileless. I could see why Ruby liked him.

“Nice hat,” I said, because he was wearing a pink baseball cap with a giant blue bass on it, pulled over his long dirty-blonde hair.

He grinned through the weak beginnings of a beard.

“Rubes said you needed a place to stay,” he said. “No prob. We’re always cool with friends crashing.”
Like many apartments in San Francisco the place was on a miniature scale, as though the builders had planned with standard and built with metric. The living room and kitchen folded into each other around the minimum of furniture—a sagging plaid couch and a card table with three chairs. The chinchilla cage (the chinchilla nowhere in sight) sat on a small table near the window seat. One of the legs was missing and replaced by library books and I wondered if they had to keep changing them out, if they chose books for their particular symmetry and heft rather than the story inside. The far corner of the room was occupied by a tree made entirely out of coat-hangers.

Jagger slid open a door off the living room and reached for a light switch. A gloomy little room with no windows—a closet, essentially—it had a futon covered with old magazines and a lamp in the form of a naked wooden woman from the neck down. A few boxes were jammed into corners. The open ones seemed to be full of Christmas lights. There was also an enormous unfinished painting propped against one wall. Someone had smeared broad swaths of indigo and bruisy purple paint across it but much of the canvas was still untouched.

“Did you make that?”

“That? No. All my stuff’s out here.”

“But you’re an artist?”

“Somewhat.”

“Cool.”

He shrugged.

“What is this, then?”
“Found that at a garage sale. I’m waiting to figure out what to do with it. I haven’t found its energy yet.”

“I don’t really do it anymore.”

“But you’re good at it.”

I shrugged. “It’s expensive.”

“But if you enjoy it.”

“No enough.”
He laughed. “Fair enough. Well, you can have this room as long as you need. That’s the bathroom next to you, but if you need to take a shower, use the one in our room, okay? Don’t forget.”

“Okay,” I said, already unpacking. “Thanks.”

“Hey,” he said. His brows drew up. “Is that a bird?”

“No, not at all.”

We both looked at the bird. Dear George sat on the table in his reassembled full-sized cage, still looking a bit ruffled. If he was indifferent to me, he seemed to reserve extra bitterness towards Jagger, who’d taken to absently rattling a pencil between the bars of his cage. I half-expected D.G. to lunge forward, seize the pencil in his beak, and snap it in half.

“I needed to get away for a little while,” I said. “It’s not a big deal or anything. I just needed to get away.” The chinchilla had been discovered behind the refrigerator and returned to his cage, a ball of brown and white fluff with stick-out ears, and the squeak of his wheel dug into the back of my brain.

“I get it,” he said. “I get it.”

I ran a finger around the edge of my water glass, short of making it hum.
“I think I saw a man die today.”

“Really?” I had Jagger’s full attention. Something in the way he looked at me struck a chord. I knew he understood exactly how I felt and unnerved I backpedaled.

“Maybe he was okay.”

“People die all the time.”

“It was crowded. He was kind of old? Big? He collapsed. But there were a lot of people there to help. Maybe he was okay.” The silence settled in. The edges of the houseplant in the center of the table glowed purple in the narrow reach of moonlight slanting through the kitchen window.

“ Weird,” Jagger said, finally.

“Yeah,” I said. “ Weird.”

We looked at each other. He grinned first.

Ruby, working late, got home several hours later. Jagger was gone—he’d left to go to a friend’s show but said to make myself at home. By the time Ruby got there he almost felt like someone imagined.

She hugged me tightly. “Did Jagger give you the grand tour?” she said, shrugging off the beige jacket she wore everywhere. She’d gotten a labret piercing and changed her hair color again: black with one red streak near her right eye. She did this. Last time I’d spent any significant time with her she’d been intent on celebrating her Latina heritage—the time before that, she’d insisted race was an illusion. Ruby flipped through phases like outfits, but always orbiting the same general personality.

“He did,” I said.
“Did he tell you about the second bathroom?”

“He said not to use the shower—is it broken?”

“No,” Ruby said. “He’s got one of his projects going on in there. It’s really important you don’t, you know. Touch it. Or run the water too hot in the sink.”

“Okay,” I said. I felt it necessary to defend him. “He made me dinner too.”

“Vegan mac and cheese?”

“Yeah.”

“Figures.” She dumped her bag on the table and scrubbed her fingers through her short hair. “I’m so glad you came, Myna. You wouldn’t believe how busy things have gotten all of a sudden. You’d think in this city we’d never run short of people but we need responsible help more than ever.”

“Ruby, I’m not here to intern.”

“Whatever you can do,” she said, waving a hand. “It’s one thing after another. First this asshole golf course is dumping pesticides right into the ocean drainage. Someone released a fucking ocelot over in Noe Valley for the hell of it, apparently. Not to mention yet another population of feral parakeets has appeared in the Tenderloin. And the city’s trying to close down this one park that has been there forever and cutting the budget on this community gardens project we’ve been working on for months and totally disregarding the Cleaner Water petition we passed around. Then there’s this explosion of African clawed frogs. They used to only be in this one pond in Golden Gate but now they’re everywhere.”

“Sounds like you’ve been busy.”

“Jesus. You could say.” She looked past me at Dear George. She blinked. “Is that a bird?”
M-

Knock knock.

Who’s there?

Turkey.

Turkey who?

Orange you glad you’re not vegetarian?

I’ve never been very good at telling jokes. I forget the punchlines or get them mixed up, and there doesn’t seem to be much point. Though maybe there is, if someone else is telling them?

I left Turkey today and took the ferry to Greece. The water here is the bluest you’ve ever seen. Looking at water so blue, you think it has to be clean, right? The cleanest you’ve ever seen. But think how much blood has been spilled into that water. Think about how many ships have been sunk to the bottom. Between this blue blue water and blue blue sky, walking on a land of bright dry scrub, there’s a taste like red wine on the back of my tongue. There’s so much beauty in this history. This forgotten death. It fascinates me.

-A
I was eating stale Life with the last of the soy milk because that was all Ruby could offer me for breakfast. She sat watching me, the skin around her eyes drawn tight. “Sorry,” she said. “I don’t usually have time for breakfast. Sorry, I really need to go grocery shopping.”

Her separate apologies annoyed me. “This is great,” I said, but I was already wondering what would be for lunch. When I’m not at home I become hypersensitive to when and where I will be getting my next meal. And I wondered what I would be doing that day. How I would even begin.

Ruby had always been nice to me. She’d lived on the same floor when I was a freshman, took me to the environmental action club meetings with her. Despite my best intentions, all the members smelled like patchouli. I felt bad, taking advantage of her hospitality. I’d never earned it.

Ruby’s phone buzzed on the table. She snatched it up. “Hello?”

While she talked—it seemed fairly urgent, something about fish (“Sardines? Are you kidding?”) I replaced D.G.’s water and food. He ignored me as usual, though he had a bitey look about him. I kept my fingers well outside dangerous radii.

“How do you feel about fish? Dead ones, I mean.”

Three reasons I thought I liked fish:

1. They’re supposed to be good for you. Right?
2. They taste good with rice.

3. Actually, they’re kind of slimy.

*One reason I decided I didn’t:*

1. They smell like a death no one wants.

   Picture this. Picture a million of anything. Beach balls, spoons, thermometers. I guarantee you’re not picturing enough, so picture double. Picture these things floating in the water, so thick you can’t see the gleam of the surface between them.

   Take whatever you’ve got in your head and picture fish. Dead fish.

   Now picture me in a borrowed pair of rubber boots, wearing blue latex gloves and holding a net with a long handle. Picture the look on my face.

   Millions of sardines had washed up against Fisherman’s Wharf, on the strips of sand buried beneath the piers, the stores and restaurants, choking out the water and tourists both. I’d never seen the area so dead. Dead in the water and dead on the shore, and then us. The Fish and Wildlife Service was there to clean it up. We were volunteers, but nobody except Ruby looked very cheerful about it. Though perhaps cheerful is the wrong word. She glowed. She stalked. I didn’t usually see her like this. She was one of those people who was always with the next person, the next conversation.

   I stood between two tall gloomy older women. I felt trapped. They both had the stringy look of marathon runners, with hard long hands and autumn faces. Neither of them tried very hard to scoop the fish from the water—they trailed their nets through the gray water like they were stirring vats of honey. It was mostly up to me to collect the sardines
floating near us and dump them into the wheelbarrows other volunteers cycled in and out.

We were arrayed all up and down the waterline. Boats cruised slowly out at the edge of the mass, working to net the fish in more open water. I was consistently on the border of nausea. The smell had crawled under my skin, I felt, rancid oils that would never leave me.

“Don’t worry,” said Left. “We do this all the time.”

I looked up at her. Her eyes reminded me of ice. Their depths somewhere else, and unexpected. Melting into her face the way her face melted into the sky behind her: forgettable, malleable.

“You scoop dead fish.”

“Fish,” said Right behind me. “Or something like it.”

I shrugged, netted more fish—a satisfying weight—and swung around to dump them out.

“Don’t worry,” Left said. “There are plenty of ichthyoids in large bodies of water.”

Right started laughing, high-pitched and horsey. Startled I looked back at her. She covered her mouth with her hand, her dark eyes scrunched into crescents. The water behind her swallowed her into its gray as she seemed she could slip into it, any moment.

“It wouldn’t get so messy if people would pay attention,” Left said.

“Nobody understands what they’re doing anymore. Nobody understands what their job actually is,” said Right.

Their complaints sounded well-rehearsed—I was careful not to interrupt. I kept filling and emptying my net. Filling and emptying. Filling and emptying.

“Oh, look,” said Left.
A dead body floated among the fish. A woman, face down, sardines tangled in her stringy yellowish hair. The three of us stared. She was like the one sardine that had swallowed the ocean, enormous among its kin. Left stuck her net out a little, then reconsidered

“Well,” Right said, rolling the word deeply in her throat. They exchanged twilit urban stares over my head. Then they looked at me.

I did not know what to say. I was afraid if I tried to speak I would vomit. Left shook her head and looked away.

Right went and notified someone and the cops came. They fished her out with the nets, sardines falling from her wet clothes like silvery slugs. Water poured from her. She was full of sea. I looked away until she was gone.

“That’s horrifying,” Left said.

“Absolutely horrifying,” said Right.

They both looked at me. The longer I stood with them, the more I felt like I should know them.

“Time to go,” said Ruby, coming up behind me. “I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted.” She looked around. “Were the police here a minute ago?”

I looked at the piles of sardines we had collected. Slippery gray bodies the size of fingers. Dull wide eyes. Like birds, fish do not blink. Death coated them in a gelatinous film.

“I could use some lunch, too,” she said.
“So do they know what happened?” I asked her later, when we were sitting in the bagel shop where Jagger worked. (“Let’s go annoy Jagger,” Ruby had said, and now he avoided our gaze, wearing his apron like it dragged on his neck).

“What happened?” Ruby echoed, drawing back her upper lip to bite through the cream cheese and lox on her bagel.

“The fish,” I said. “I can’t believe you’re eating that after shoveling them all morning.”

She shrugged. “This is salmon, not sardine. And the fish suffocated. There was a storm offshore, and they swam in to the bay and died. Not enough oxygen. This can happen in enclosed areas.”

“The Bay’s pretty big.”

“Probably the storm chased up a lot of low-oxygen water from deeper water with them.”

“So they ran out of air.”

“Yup.”

I laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Fish suffocating? In water? Come on. Doesn’t that seem a little funny?”

Ruby wrinkled her forehead. “I guess so.”

“Sorry,” I said. We finished our bagels in silence. Ruby started reading the newspaper abandoned on our table, opening to the events page. I gazed out the back window at the small garden there, surprising and lush, walled in on all sides by old buildings. The city can be like that: interrupted by unexpected pockets of green. Restless, I got up and walked
into the garden. It was only about the size of a bedroom, but it smelled fresh. Damp. Compressed green space. I saw a dim shape moving around in one of the rooms several floors up. They closed their blinds. The fog had rolled back. The air sharp but warm.

A sturdy stone frog by the end of the path crouched in the shade of pink fox gloves. It smirked at me with a wide frog mouth.

Returning inside I found Ruby now working on the puzzle page. “There’s a frog.” I said. “A stone one. In the garden.”

“A frog?” she looked up blankly, chewing on the end of her pencil.

“A stone one.”

“Did you ever hear about the frog storm?”

“Huh?”

“I think it happened somewhere like, Serbia, Romania, I don’t remember. It was a while ago. There was a rainstorm—except all these frogs rained instead of water. By the bucketful. Tiny frogs, thousands of them. Splattered on the pavement. A lot of them survived and were hopping around. Hop hop hop,” She bounced the pencil against the paper, then stuck it back in her mouth and grinned around it. “I can’t believe I didn’t remember this earlier. It’s like the fish thing.”

“You’re making this up.”

“It happens all the time. Mmm. Frog soup.”

I sighed.

“You know.” She eyed me. “I know you didn’t come all the way to help me out. But I’m glad you did.”

“Oh. You’re welcome.”
“As long as you need to, you got a place here. I know exactly how these things go.”

“I have to return the bird to someone. As soon as I do that I’ll be gone.”

“Hopefully not too soon,” Ruby said. “Because we gotta do it all again tomorrow.”

**Things I like:**

1. Cutting my hair with sharp scissors.
2. The private way Ruby and Jagger hook fingers.
3. Pulling jeans over my legs after shaving.
4. A photograph fading into color.
5. The smell of the parched hills after a rainstorm.
6. The color of Jagger’s eyes.
7. The shuddering click the lens makes.
8. Still water against the palm of my hand.

**Things I don’t like:**

1. Being lonely.
2. Fear.
3. The sharp smell of insects.

Later: I sat at the table and looked at the bird. I’d become accustomed to seeing him always in the periphery of my vision, like everything else I tried to ignore or forget. It
seemed we would not be separated until this formless ache had been resolved. As long as the bird wasn’t cursed (I wondered), I was okay with that.

“Yo,” said Jagger behind me, and I nearly choked on the sandwich I was eating.

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Sorry. Ruby around?”

“She had to go back to the office.”

“Ah.” He pulled up a chair and leaned forward on his elbows, mirroring my posture.

“How was class?” I asked.

“Good,” he said. He was taking a night class at an art school. “The show I’m in’s next week.” A smile slipped out of the corner of his mouth. “You coming?”

“Sure,” I said. Like Ruby, Jagger needed something from me and even though it didn’t matter if it was actually me who gave it to him that was okay, that was fine.

“Good,” he said in a new way.

A silence drew out between us.

The fish were gone within a week. The two women from the first day never reappeared: they were replaced by a tight-woven pack of high schoolers who deftly and cheerfully scooped fish like they couldn’t even tell the fish were dead. I wanted to pick up handfuls of those dead things and fling them at them until they recognized what they were doing wasn’t a service, it wasn’t a clean-up, it was a nasty business of shifting smelly organic matter from point A to point B which was no different than point A, really, except without people around to see or smell.
Yet the work went quickly enough and after the last day I couldn’t justify postponing any longer.

“The Sunset?” Ruby chewed slowly and swallowed. “That would be the 71, I guess.”

“Yup,” said Jagger. “Keep taking it west and you’ll end up in the Pacific.” He was sitting on the floor playing with Jagger the chinchilla, trying to coax him to run up a ramp he’d built on the chair. Jagger seemed more interested in searching the rug for stale crumbs. Jagger held a dried cranberry in front of Jagger, who blinked. He looked bored.

I tossed an almond from my salad at Jagger, who didn’t seem to notice, but Jagger frowned at me. “Leave the Jaggermeister alone,” he said, cradling the chinchilla against his knee. (“I think it’s female,” Ruby had told me. “But don’t tell him that.”)

He had started a new art project, or rather, a new collection. Now he was collecting boxes of old costume jewelry. He’d stacked them up by the wire hanger Christmas tree, still missing the paper maché eggs lined up in a row in the corner. One he’d painted black like a rotten tooth.

“You’re sure it’s the 71 and not the 6?” Ruby said. She took her dishes and Jagger’s to the sink and started running the hot water. “Oh no, yeah, that’s right.”

Jagger snorted. He was dragging a string around in front of Jagger, trying to catch his attention. The chinchilla meandered in the direction of the open cage. Jagger sighed, and leaned back against the wall and said something neither of us could hear above the water.

“What?” Ruby said, shutting off the tap briefly.

“Nothing,” he said. “Never mind.”

“Okay,” she said, rolling her eyes and turning the water back on.

Jagger looked at me. “Did—people—died?”
“Did I what?”

He leaned closer, raised his voice. “Did you read the Sunday obits?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve noticed you reading them.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah.”

“Just like the one you saw.”

“Not really,” I said. “The old guy was old—“

“—not that old—”

“That woman was probably depressed.”

“—tons of people are—”

“And who knows, the teenager could’ve choked on a goldfish or something.”

“But you know who I’m talking about.”

“People die in this city all the time. Just because they don’t die in a bed doesn’t mean there’s something crazy going on. It’s not like they’re all blond prostitutes with mafia connections.”

Jagger held up both hands and leaned back. “Whatever,” he said archly. “I’m just saying. I’m just saying.”

“What, exactly?”

“Nothing,” he said, laughing at me. “I’m just saying.”

I was beginning to see why Ruby’s temper ran short with him.

“What?” said Ruby, turning off the water. “Just saying what?”
Memory #2

I used to be afraid of the water. I fought and screamed at the hapless swim teacher at the community pool (probably younger than me now, I realized) until my parents were forced to withdraw me from the summer program. Then on a family camping trip Pops took me out on the lake and threw me in.

The lake gaped wide with dark intention. Gravity shouted my name. I fell through water. Swim, he said, and when I started to splutter, groping for the aluminum edge of the boat, he hauled me out and said look. What are you so afraid of? Nobody’s going to let you drown. Swim.

I guess it worked. I learned. But I remember shame, though Pops was proud of me plenty. Ashamed someone else had to hold the fear for me.

Potomaphobia (n): Fear of running water. Fear of rivers, fear of canals, fear of faucets turned on. Fear of flushing toilets, fear of creeks. Fear of waterfalls. There is a word for the fear of everything. But waterfalls I am afraid of worst. It’s not the height. I’m fine with heights. It’s not the water, not anymore.

I think it’s because they remind me of the waterfall at the end of the world. I hear it in my dreams, the entire sea thundering over the edge of the world, pouring into space. I know the world is round, I know the centrifugal force of the spinning world. But that waterfall’s still there, drumming into that dark matter. That endless sky.
The day I went looking for George was cooler than it had been and sunny, with the dense, drifting white clouds that drag their shadows over the city in a high wind, so the light waxed and waned and I felt something in me wax and wane with it.

The bus I took out to the Sunset was full. Everyone careful not to look at each other.

**Rules for Riding a Bus**

1) Never make eye contact.

2) If you do make eye contact, pretend it was an accident.

3) This is easier said than done. Make no sudden movements. Unfocus your eyes and find something directly to the person’s left or right. Feign disinterest.

4) Only crazy people have conversations with strangers next to them.

5) Savvy women have this one down: wear nice shoes. That’s what people will be looking at.

6) Have something to do. Most people have a phone. They communicate with people they love and hate equally. You should have one too. If you must, bring a book. Bestsellers only.

Take inventory of those around you. There’s the old Chinese woman with her groceries and the small boy kicking his legs with the woman with her lavender sari with the yellow sash around the waist of the pretty girl with the midriff top and the glinting ring around the finger of the man in the seat with his head back against the glass and sunglasses tinted with blue in the eyes of the teenager hanging by the straps and swaying with the motion of the bus everyone sways, pretending not to pay attention.
The smell of ocean expanded inside of me, as I got off the bus near the end of its route. I could not see the ocean but I felt it there. Perhaps I carried it with me too, the smell of fish now a part of me. This was one of the districts of San Francisco overlooked by tourists and buried in fog that blew in wet gusts off the bay. The area was largely middle class and bare of trees. Older buildings sandwiched together: windowsills with faded paint, rust on the iron.

It wasn’t hard to find the building, wedged next to a Korean grocery store with red double doors and across from a coffee shop with a giant Russian flag in the window. Parkview Apartments, which faced west, had neither a view of a park nor of the ocean so far as I could tell. The dark brown paint was peeling but there were flowerboxes on various windowsills and it seemed somebody, at least, was trying to make an effort.

It was probably far more expensive than it ought to be to live here. But everyone wants to live by water. This whole state has always been like that. Everyone with their faces pressed to the windows, watching the waves, that wide expanse of blue—everyone facing west, or huddled around lakes that mirror the sky. I wonder when we decided that was beautiful.

The front door was glass and locked. The sun weighed on the back of my neck and I shaded the sides of my face against the glare. This had been somebody’s home once. Now the steps were carpeted and someone lived off the lobby. I could see that. I could see things were changing.

I looked at the names on the placard. Some of them were fading. They were all last names, so I couldn’t say which one was his. But I had a number. I buzzed it.
Nothing.

So I waited. Why not? I had all the time in the world.

A woman showed up eventually and I slipped in behind her. The air through the opened door was considerably warmer than outside, though a breeze still stirred the air. I shut it quickly. I had the sense something inside would rush past me and escape if it could. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans. Whatever I had felt lurked in the corners, a sulking dusky shadow.

The woman eyed me, and went into the ground floor apartment. I went up the stairs. The building had the scent of dormitory cleaners and orthodontists’ offices. Yet each door I passed had lives behind it. I imagined families, young struggling couples, elderly bachelors. Maybe one named George.

When I knocked on door 302 I was shaking. My heart flushed blood through my chest and limbs. I didn’t think this would matter to me so much and it hadn’t until exactly this moment. I traced my gaze over the blank grain of the wooden door. I wanted something to hook on, some sign I was doing the right thing. That there was such a thing as a right thing. Something that would make everything fit. Something finished, finally—something done.

But nobody was coming to the door. I stood wondering if I should slide a note underneath.

A door creaked open—not the one in front of me, but the one behind me, and it took me a moment to realize the spatial difference.

“Girl,” said an old woman’s voice. “No one lives there.”

I turned to see a squat, round-faced woman of some indeterminate age between fifty-five and seventy, her broad, swollen feet stuffed into pink Crocs. She wore a yellow
sweatsuit and a pink athletic headband holding back her thinning gray hair though she hardly looked like the type to do much exercising.

“It’s been empty for at least six months.” She paused to think. “At least.”

“Was the guy’s name George?” I said.

“Completely undisciplined,” she muttered to herself. “Running up and down stairs at the crack of dawn like there wasn’t another soul in the building.”

“Who?”

“The children. Them and the children. Quiet couple, but their kids made up for it.”

She left the door open and retreated back inside. “But there might have been a George there before them. George… George… maybe it was Garth? Hm. William?”

I hovered in her doorway. Her apartment smelled like plants and coffee with an undertone of lemon. The entryway abounded with green. Sturdy, unattractive shoes littered the gap between me and a living room stuffed with old, unmatched furniture (including a gaudy floral couch), and plants everywhere.

It had been a while since I’d been so close to so many plants.

“You can come in,” she said, waddling back out of the kitchen with an enormous cup of coffee. “I’ll see if I can remember this George person. Was he a relative of yours?”

“Friend of a friend,” I said. Orchids hung in pots from the ceiling among ballerina-like fuchsias. I touched a few of the gaudy hot pink and purple flowers and sat on the part of the couch closest to the door, which remained open. This did not seem to bother her. She plopped into a large wicker chair, putting her feet on the coffee table and slurping from her mug.
“Let me see, let me see,” she said. “What did he look like? I love mysteries, I really do. I could have been a detective and maybe I would have been if my mind didn’t get so scrambled up. It’s so hard to keep names straight. Sometimes I have trouble remembering which way is home and I start walking up hills because I knew I came down them first. Once I ended up all the way on the other side of town, almost, and I kept thinking my building was right around the corner, but then I noticed, quick thinking here, the buses were all heading the wrong directions, so I turned around and got on the first one heading the opposite way. So what I’m meaning to say is I get it all sorted in the end. I usually do.”

She fell silent. My initial hope had frayed into a sour frustration and I focused that frustration on the empty fishbowl she had sitting in the middle of the coffee table as though it might suddenly duplicate itself. It had beads of colored glass and an intricate pink castle with a moat around it. It seemed a surprisingly tacky centerpiece given that the walls were covered with pictures and hangings from all over the world. The names from places I’d never been. Cape Town. Morocco. Belize. Kingston. Sri Lanka. The Philippines. Edinburgh. Calais. It gave the otherwise strange and musty apartment the air of something exotic. I wondered if she’d been to these places. Looking at her it seemed unlikely.

My gaze drifted. Over by the window there was an old Baldwin upright, sagging under the weight of two enormous philodendrons. “Oh,” she said, catching me looking. Greed in her voice. “Do you play?”

“I used to,” I said, standing. I lifted the fallboard and saw the action had been completely removed. No keys, only a hollow space where they were supposed to be, stuffed full of maps and sheets of paper that looked like bills. Holding my fingers arched over them I silently began to play Chopin’s Opus 9 no. 2 in E flat major, because that was all I could
remember. There was a musicality to it—the right hand working separately from the left, one more expressive, one more controlled. I thought I had forgotten everything but felt it in my head—not the song but the difficulty of the song, the hours I had spent laboring over this song and songs like it, because that’s what my mother and father wanted me to do (Allie got the violin), and I wanted to please them and please myself too. But I had never quite mastered it.

Crocs watched me, her pink fingernails clashing with the blue mug she gripped, her mouth tight and her eyes both amused and preoccupied, and I felt such a rush of homesickness tears scorched the back of my eyes. I’d spent three days a week after school taking piano lessons for five years with a retired elementary school music teacher who’d been nice to me despite my bitterness and then I let all her patient work slide right out through my fingers. I doubted I could play a fraction of what I’d ever learned.

I stared hard out the window without seeing anything.

“Isn’t that a beautiful view?” she said.

Off-center from a road bearing straight down to the west I saw in the distance a tiny shard of blue, that particularly metallic shade that makes me dream of flight. Besides that all I could see was the hard curving faces of buildings, and a blocky piece of sky.

“IT must be nice to have,” I said, “such a green place in the middle of the city,” and her smile deepened, her eyes narrowing to slits.
“It is,” she said. “A park is very nice and all, but a green spot of your own... there’s nothing like it.” She held her hand palm up like a waitress supporting a tray and traced a circle, a broken coyness in the gesture. “See?” she said. “It smells like heaven. Would you like to help me?” She picked up a watering can. I took it without thinking and my immediate compliance irritated me. I didn’t owe her anything.

I owed my grandfather though. I had to finish this for him. So I asked again: “Do you remember George?”

In the fishbowl I had thought was empty a frog clung to the tiny castle like a deformed dragon, its throat slowly pulsing as it stared back at me.

“George? Is that the man who lived across the hall?”

I simmered. “If you don’t know George, I have to go.”

“Oh,” she said. “He’s not here.”

Something about the way she said that gave me pause. “You know where he is,” I pressed. My heart felt like a laundry machine sloshing in my chest. I was being rude.

“Who?” she said “I don’t think he ever told me his name.” She winked, and held up a finger. “But I remember. I remember.”

“Remember what?”

“Are you always in such a rush?”

“Yes,” I said.
I had this strange, immediate yearning for the ocean. I wanted to be in the water, with salt in my hair and my skin, foam curling around me, stones digging in to the bottom of my feet and the steady pull away from shore. Alone, and free of birds.

“Running around like you do, such a flighty girl… that will catch up to you someday, you know. You’ll find that in trying to make the next thing start you’ll only get more quickly to the end with nothing to show for it.”

She spread her arms out as if to say, look, look at me, and I didn’t want to, but there was something commanding about her squat, thick-skinned form, her horizontal eyebrows and thinning dyed hair.

“I should know,” she said. “You’ll have years to look like this, to feel like this.”

She seemed smaller and younger then. She picked up her coffee again and I saw space through the hollows of her arm. “I used to travel,” she said. “When I was beautiful I went all over the world and saw strange and fantastic things like you would never believe.”

I didn’t believe her. “Okay,” I said. “But George?”

She stood again and walked along the edge of the room, touching stray objects as if to spur thought. Her hand lingered on a small jade elephant the size of a baby’s head. “There is nothing like travel,” she said. People think they know the world but they don’t.”

“George,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “The man across the hall.”

She moved on, rattling an umbrella in its stand. “It was a rainy day, when I met him,” she said. “I had just finished work—this was before I had money—and I was still wearing my uniform. I smelled like food, like fried fish. He had just finished filming and was wearing
such a handsome suit and I dropped my purse and he handed it to me and said my eyes were lovely.”

I was realizing we probably weren’t talking about George.

“He told me to meet him at the bar up the street in an hour and I rushed home and put on my best perfume and changed my clothes—I didn’t even have time to wash up—but then when I got there he didn’t come, and he didn’t come. I never found out what happened to him.”

“That’s too bad,” I said.

She rounded on me, something sharp in her grimace. “Too bad? Of course it’s too bad. When I was young, I was pretty and smart. So I will always, always be prettier and smarter than you.” She held out a trembling finger. Something moved in her face, some anger.

“I’d better go,” I said, setting down the watering can.

“Don’t you want to know where George is?”

“I thought you didn’t know.”

“I know where he’s from, don’t I? It’s all the same.”

“Where?”

“Yes,” she said with satisfaction. “He was from up north. He helped me carry some of my plants up. They were so much heavier in their pots than I remembered. I thanked him for his kindness. I said he must not be from around here.” Her voice had softened. Her anger elsewhere.

“Where?”

“Oh, you know, one of those funny little logging towns.”
“Where?”

“Ukiah. That’s a name, right?”

I waited for my chest to leap with yes, of course, but all I felt was a weak trickle of doubt.

“And you lived across the hall from him?”

“For three and a half days. I moved in, he moved out.” She gave me the hard edge of a smile, and then turned her attention to something behind me. “Oh, look,” she said. “The orchids are blooming.”

Here, everything happened more slowly. Even the dust floated, glowing midair, waiting for the time to fall.

“North?” I asked.

“What other direction would it be?”

Before I left, she gave me an envelope and said here. Give this to him.

The look in her eyes was so strange I could not say no.

“Anything else you want to know? You can come back anytime.” She spoke as though addressing the world at large. “I have lots of stories. About all sorts of people. I could fill hours with them, but no one wants to listen.”

I felt the pique of interest, as though the walls were listening. There were so many ghosts in this room. Some of them might have been mine.

“Maybe,” I said, and fled, shutting the door behind me.
You and the Dog

You are not lost. You are in a place you’ve never been before, is all—you know where you are going and where you will go after that. You have stopped your bike on the way home, because there is a dog looking at you, a shaggy dog with a droopy apology in his eyes. You know him, know where he belongs. He belongs with you. You start biking and he comes running, moving like joy across the street after you.

“Hey,” you shout into the wind, “hey, hey!” And both of you move faster.

In your cave of treasures you show the dog everything that belongs to you. Everything you have collected. There are a lot of things and it takes a long time but the dog is patient and watchful.

1) A No Parking sign spotted with bullet holes. A scribbled sticker over the P.

2) Three tiny Mexican flags on toothpicks.

3) A downy owl feather, the barbs clumped together from too much touching.

The sky is thunderous gray. You hold up a sweater and show the dog. “See,” you say. “Everything I have is full of holes.”

4) A postcard of crescent-curved Hanalei Bay, still blank.

5) A stack of notepaper with the heading Don’t Forget To... beside a cartoon elephant scratching his head.

6) A jewelry box for keeping favorite things. The ballerina inside has a broken leg.

Storms here smell of sage and parched earth. They smell of rain coming a long way off, and the thirsty spirits of the spaces between—the dusty smells of oil, of asphalt, of trees stripped naked by the sun. “It’s important to remember the things important to you.” The dog
pants. He is a patchwork dog. You can see the seams holding him together. Old scars and new ones.

7) A handful of bone-white shells, mostly whole.
8) The unraveled innards of a cassette.
9) A photograph of a crumbling castle with April ’97 scrawled in pen on the back.
   “I like to think about other places people have gone,” you tell the dog. “I want to go on a vacation. To this place. And this place.” You tangle your hands in the tape. “And wherever this comes from.” And you tell the dog: “These are the things we carry so other people will remember us too.”
10) A woman’s bracelet that sparkles more than anything else you’ve ever seen.
11) A love poem dedicated to someone named Mike (the I is dotted with a heart)
12) A broken pair of reading glasses... an empty wallet with initials carved in, DLI...

You say to the dog: You have to help me guard these things. You look around you. Down here by the creek, in this cave built of cardboard and bushes and garbage bags and old blankets, you have a whole world.

This is your whole world.

And the world is thundering.
12. The Belly of the Earth

“I don’t even know if he’s there,” I said. “Even if I had a way of getting there. Do the trains even run there? Maybe I should look into this.”

D.G. watched me as I opened his cage door. He seemed to be losing fewer feathers, though he still looked somewhat scraggly. I let him out while I cleaned his cage and he circled the room—a whir of feathers, a yellow blur in the afternoon light that gleamed also on all of Jagger’s unfinished art projects, as though they were awakening through imperfection.

“What I want to know is, really, canaries? There are probably cheaper birds out there.”

The canary flew to the top of his cage, and subsided.

Maybe a yellow bird made the darkness of the mine more bearable. Especially if it sang. I imagined the black in the belly of the earth, crawling through a tunnel of my making, lodged in the throat of some great beast. Descending toward some forgotten stomach, skin coated in the dust of pressurized layers of a history that does not belong to me or any person.

My mind was still buried when Mom called. As she talked at me I heard something in the air between us, some hollow longing in her throat like the ring of tinnitus in my ear. It
made an answering pain resonate in my left side. The longer I listened to her the more that pain concentrated down to a ball bearing of hurt.

“Right Mom,” I said over and over. “Uh-huh. Uh-huh.”

She was worried about Dad, she said. “I’m worried about Patrick.” She’d never called him by his name to me before—he was always “Dad” or “your dad” or “your father.” I resented the new familiarity, the expectations of me it implied. I didn’t want to be my mother’s peer.

“He only eats or sleeps in the most minimal of ways,” she said, and all I could think was, Don’t you have friends you could tell this to? What about your sisters. You have two of them. Don’t you have someone at work you could talk to? Why do you have to tell this to me?

“I find him walking through the house at night. He has a particular route he follows from room to room.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t worry about Dad. But I figured he was capable of taking care of himself. He would know, or have to know, if there was something wrong with him. He would do something about it, if it mattered. He always did.

“When I try to ask him about it he says nothing.”

Besides, I didn’t know what to do for someone who was grieving. I knew too little of Pops to grieve for him as Dad could. When all was said and done, I’d barely known the man.
“Once he said: ‘I’m thinking.’”

Holding my phone away slightly from my ear so I wouldn’t have to listen to the small catches in Mom’s voice when she breathed between words, I watched D.G. rattle around his cage. He seemed to be more energetic since we’d come here. He’d finally, I felt, forgiven me for the bus trip, but the fluttery, clicking noises of his activity made me tense, like there was something inside me that needed to get out.

“He hasn’t said a word to me since.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Maybe a therapist or something would be a good idea.”

“What good would a therapist do?” she said. “He already has someone he can talk to.”

_I meant for you, _I thought. _What am I supposed to do?_

“Okay,” I said. “Uh-huh.”

Acid crept into her voice. “By the way, the dog ran away and I don’t have the damn time to care where it went. You can come back and look for it if you want.”

She hung up before I could say goodbye.

I’d forgotten about the dog.
M-

When you come here don’t trust anyone for what they seem to be, trust them for what they could be and trust that worming feeling inside your gut when something’s wrong. You learn to surf instinct the way I did and that’s how I know Ray the American Tourist is safe to bring home while Ben the American Tourist is looking to fill his own pockets with mine. Yeah, you slip. People slip all the time. But you learn to make choices without thinking. That’s the key. Stop thinking so hard all the time. A white-burn joy will fill the places your thoughts leave behind.

Not long after I got here I got stranded in a train station. I thought I had enough money for the taxi—I did have enough money for the taxi, but someone must have ripped me off on the train. Trains are like cities on wheels—you get all kinds, the whole world running the same track at the same time. So I got stranded in the train station but it didn’t matter. I bought a sandwich with the loose change in my pockets and made friends with a wonderful old German couple who gave me a ride to the hostel. It was easy enough to find a job. I’ve had to do some things for money that are a little bad but not a lot. Sometimes I get good stories out of it.

I ate the perfect sandwich today: jambon et beurre on baguette—crunchy and soft, salty and savory. Parfait.

-A
The dream began normally, if dreams ever begin normally. I was a fish. I was carting smaller fish away in wheelbarrows. They kept chattering at me, but I was too busy concentrating on how to maneuver a wheelbarrow with fish parts. It was made doubly difficult by the raining frogs. They smacked against my head and shoulders with wet, rubbery plops.

“If you’d turned off the water before you left, you wouldn’t have this problem!” one of the little fish said, and they clamored at me, flapping about in the wheelbarrow.

“Pickled!” “Smoked!” “Grilled!” “Omega 3 fatty-acids!” “Stargazy pie!”

“Stargazy!” “Stargazy!” “Stargazy!”

“Shut up,” I said, and dumped them over the side of the cliff. They kept spilling out of the wheelbarrow, bouncing off the crumbling rock and landing with small splashes in the water far below.

“It’s culturallllll!” one wailed.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a dark absence in the shape of a person, and felt its sadness burning through me.

“I’m sorry,” I blubbered, “I’m sorry”—and I threw myself out of the dream.

I was awake, almost. The room was dark and close and hot. I felt sticky. I tasted blood. I went into the kitchen for a glass of milk. My body felt awkward and heavy, like gravity had skewed. I leaned against the wall to support myself, too drained to bother trying to walk straight. My pajamas rasped against the wall.

A full moon shone through the living room windows—which were my parents’ living room windows, and my mom stood there in her blue satin pajamas. There was something
There’s a recurring dream I have of a little boy. He’s about eight or nine but older and wiser than me. Lost and only a little bit afraid. Sometimes I am watching him from a great distance, overhead like a hawk. Sometimes I am right up close behind him, close enough to whisper. Or I do not see him at all and he is somewhere behind me.

The scenery changes. In the beginning it was a forest with tall razor-thin trees. Now it is cities sometimes too. Once it was under the sea. The little boy is always alone. I get the impression that he knows I am here, that this is a game he is playing, that I am playing too, and in the way of games I am slightly frustrated with it but pride keeps me playing, pride and the knowledge that I am part of this game anyway. That if I back out now I will be more lost than him.

(Cry, Olly olly oxen free.)

What happens next is always a surprise with a secret at the core of it, a hard kernel I cannot crack.

I sat heavily on the stairs of my parents’ house, waiting for her to turn around and look at me. Moonlight cast luminous shapes on the floor, barred by windowpanes. My mother stood at the open window and looked up at the moon, pale and swollen like the belly of a pregnant woman. I could see the youth in my mother’s bones.

“Mom?” I tried to say, but I wasn’t sure my voice was working right. It sounded hollow and distorted, as though I spoke through water. She didn’t seem to hear me.
“Tracy?” I tried.

She turned in my direction, enough to reveal her profile. She looked like a stranger. I thought of floating paper lanterns, the glow of them on night-black rivers. This is the strangeness she was to me.

“You need to take better care of your things,” she said.

I tried to explain we’d had this conversation already.

“Do you really expect me to clean up this mess? You forgot to put your father away. There are pieces of him scattered all over the living room. The dog started chewing on them and when I yelled at him he ran away.”

Shadows twitched on the floor. I did not want to look at them. I said, “I’m sorry.” I said it repeatedly but she wouldn’t stop talking, and I raised my voice to drown her out and free myself. The blood taste was getting stronger. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

I ran up the stairs and crawled back into bed. “You’re dreaming,” I said. “Go back to sleep.”

I woke to the sharper edges of reality.

I rolled out of the futon in the direction of the bathroom—staggering, loosened by sleep—to see myself in the mirror. There was blood smeared on my face like paint. It took me a minute to realize it was my nose that bled.

I held a wad of toilet paper against the trickle of blood and leaned my head back until I could no longer breathe through my nose and my mouth was full of the taste of iron. I didn’t turn on the overhead light knowing it would scorch my night-soft eyes. In the yellow glow of the nightlight, weird shapes collected beneath my nose and cheekbones. I looked like a candle person.
There was a spray bottle of water on top of the toilet. Still with my neck craned to keep the blood draining, I pulled back the shower curtain, wondering what kind of art project meant I couldn’t use the shower.

The white fiberglass walls were covered in hair, long strands twisted into arcs and curls and bubbling lines, all the way into the bottom of the tub. As if some child had scribbled all over a blank sheet of paper with hair instead of ink. The longer I looked the dizzier I felt and, somehow, insulted.

My nose had stopped bleeding. I went back to my room and lay on my back and stared at the ceiling awash in amphibious glow, wondering what was wrong with me. If I was wrong.

Night sounds very different than day. The noise retreats, leaving a bubble of dark both quiet and waiting. Life carries on somewhere else and we all go on pause. I always had the sense I was missing out on something, there was somewhere else I should be.

Somewhere out in the city three more people died I wouldn’t know about until Sunday’s obituaries. Then it was morning and the dream faded, until it felt like a story someone told me.
George

He thought dreams were nothing but spasms, bursts of untranslatable electricity poorly translated, some meaningless disgorgement of the brain. But that night he dreamed something so cold and clear it felt not like living but close to it, like walking parallel to something real and peering occasionally at it through curtains.

He stood on the beach at night, ankle-deep in water, pants rolled up to his knees. The waves came in long, the height of whispers, rimmed in white against deep dark. Whales turned slowly in the breach, spinning up umbrella plumes of spray. Fish too, great schools of them, he felt somewhere beneath the surface: schools that moved like single bodies, millions of muscle fibers working together. Behind him the sand stretched low and continuous and there was nothing else but stars—which glimmered and twisted slowly on the water as if governed by kelp. His feet thrummed in the water. They were the most living part of him.

He woke up that morning aching everywhere except for his feet. Disturbed out of his normal routine he lay in bed staring down at his feet, wriggling his toes and wondering what that was about. *No point in wondering though* and he went into the kitchen and poured himself cereal and left money out on the porch for the cat. Then went back and got the money and replaced it with cat food and wondered whether or not he was losing it now. Whether some hiker would find him in the woods naked and raving, bereft of both sanity and dignity.

He’d shoot himself first. He thought about it sometimes—thought about walking into town and buying a gun and setting the muzzle to the roof of his mouth and introducing a hole to the inside of his brain. Of course, with the way machines worked in his part of the woods—unpredictably at best—who could guarantee the results?
He spent a long time in the garden that day. The slugs had moved back in overnight and were chewing holes in the hostia again despite the zinnias he’d planted around them. He could see the mottled creatures waiting, stretching in the shade of leaves, like fingers made of yellow clay. The cat ignored them.

His feet tingled and throbbed, oscillating between pain and an absence of sensation. Instead of his feet he felt roots curling under his feet, felt the hairs on his feet grooping for soil like the soft hairs of carrots. Or turnips. And sometimes the soil under him disgusted: those grubby blind worms, the crevices of decay and death. How many empty bodies had been buried here? All over the world a hidden layer of corpses, feet toward the sun, eyes gazing up at the people who trod upon them, the ubiquitous masses in hedonistic celebration of...of what? Nobody knew how to celebrate anymore, much less what. He’d learned the hard way: small things, small ways.

Because he was a small thing and he only worked in small ways—with one exception.

That was the unfinished Project back in the woods, the emergence of an image that had haunted him since he was very young. Part of him was still a boy within his chest, as though looking up from the bottom of a dry well, dank and slimy with moss. Still curious about things.

Curious about the people back in the woods—as much curious as fearful, as much fearful as furious. What were they celebrating? What led them here?

He thought: They were building something too.

He could not help himself: he went. Across the creek—still but for the flickering of current and water-bugs, stones slippery with a skin of water—into the thicker brush on the far
sandy bank. Up the hillside, heart throbbing like a fish, and down new trails made by fresh feet.

He did not recognize them as dwellings at first, those ramshackle piles of branch and needle, but it was clear they were not accidental and soon they resolved in his view as huts designed by someone enterprising but inexperienced, tents fashioned out of the materials native to the place. In the nearest someone snored lightly. Just out of sight down the trail he heard people talking in low unhurried voices.

They saw him before he could hide. For a moment they stared at him—a woman with frayed black hair pulled back from sharp cheekbones, a skinny man with an acne-scarred face and ragged jeans. He caught the three stones he’d been juggling all in one hand, *clack clack clack*. Both of them still with the softness and anger of youth in their faces. George did not often admit to himself how much that bright fire frightened him. Sometimes he felt as though he’d been born old.

The first stone caught him by surprise—a sharp whirr past his face, the backhand of a tiny gust of wind. The woman half-smiled, and took the next stone. The sudden pain in his thigh was more a surprise than a hurt. He was already backing away and he moved into the trees and jogged away huffing and they didn’t pursue him.

What frightened him most was how they never said a word to him. As if nothing needed to be said. As if words could no longer communicate the story of a stone.
14. A Conversation with Jagger

“So what exactly is this shower art of yours about?”

“It’s not ‘about’ anything.”

I hid my smile behind D.G.’s cage. “So what, exactly, are you doing?”

Jagger was helping me clean the cage. He caught my gaze through the bars. “Every day I shift the hair in a particular way. Then I take a picture. The series of pictures is the art, don’t you see? The mundane—hair in the shower—becomes extraordinary.”

I slid around to remove the water dish through the open door. Our hands brushed.

“The motion creates a story. It’s a story of chaos. But also of control.” Jagger tapped my shoulder from behind, handing me a dry rag with his other hand. I dried off the water dish, refilled it, and replaced it inside the cage. I circled the cage again to make room for him.

“It’s not something everyone can understand. But that’s the whole point.” Jagger reached around, laying clean newspaper on the bottom of the cage. I followed him, running the rag over the clean bars of the cage to dry it.

“Wait until the show on Friday. Then you’ll see.”

“Sure.” My head whirled along interlocking circles, the patterns our feet danced out.

“Then you’ll see.”

I gripped the cage with one hand and kissed him. D.G. fluttered over our heads.
You and the Woman

You follow the sunflower woman.

Sometimes you find people that are interesting to you. They are people that follow you or that you follow—people that move the same worn tracks as you without knowing. It is the people like this, the threadbare ones, that leave the most interesting things behind. The sunflower woman is one of these. She’s getting out of a car up ahead at the same house where she’s come every week.

She’s young with a turned-up nose and a tight black skirt wrapped around wide hips. You don’t know if she is pretty or not but you like her. She has her arms full of sunflowers again and you like that too, you like the brilliance of them, when everything is so hot and wilting. You come here every week to see her.

The man who opens the door for her is the same man that opens that door every time.

“Please, Clary,” he says. “You don’t have to do this,” he says and you can see just by looking at him this brings him no joy but she doesn’t see it, she never sees it.

“I feel bad,” she says. “That this is all I can do.”

He thanks her and takes them and closes the door and she comes down the steps a little brighter now, the glow of the sunflowers in her face.
15. Listen

Ruby and I passed the bottle of cheap cabernet back and forth and watched Jagger make paper maché eggs. He started by blowing up tiny balloons one at a time, cheeks puffing out, and we laughed. He turned redder, unable to say anything until he’d knotted them off. “Give me that,” he said, and snatched the bottle out of Ruby’s hand. “This is harder than it looks.”

Half of them popped. He brushed the glue and newsprint carefully onto the survivors, then set them aside to dry. We all looked at them: a row of fractured headlines in the shape of something cute. All lined up like that I thought of Russian nesting dolls. I wanted to take the eggs apart and put them inside each other, smallest to largest the way they belonged.

“At are you going to leave them like that?” I asked. “Are you going to paint them?”

He still would not look at me. “I have some buttons…” he trailed off.

“Let’s go up to the roof,” Ruby said, twisting the bottle back out of his hand. “Myna hasn’t seen the roof.”

“You can get up to the roof?”

“Come on.”

We left the apartment and
I am the littlest doll.

went up the stairs. Near the second landing there was a window with a rusty latch that squeaked when Ruby wrenched it open.

“Me first,” she said. “Then Myna.”

Jagger used his hands like a step for us and then hopped up—on the other side the two of us pulled Jagger up together. The roof was a broad ledge running around the side of the building. We whisked past the curtained windows that faced the rear of the building and came around to the side. There was a low old wooden platform a few meters across, a squat retaining wall streetside, and one bedraggled looking lawn chair.

“It’s like someone tried to build a deck,” said Jagger, “and forgot to leave a way to get there.”

Night in the city is a perpetual dawn. Jagger and Ruby murmured to each other and I drank more of the wine. We lay on our backs on grimy fog-softened wood and looked at the stars. I could only see three, and I think one was a planet.

The night settled around us like cotton. I was just warm enough not to be cold.

“I am the littlest doll.”


“Stop that,” she said, and jabbed me in the side. I yelped. It felt like she had gotten me with something sharper than a fingernail but when I felt for blood I found nothing. I rubbed my throbbing side.

*Ouch*, I mouthed up at sky.

“That’s what happens,” Jagger said, from somewhere on my other side. He was a shape I had lost in the night. “When people try to put two beautiful names together.”
He held up a finger and I could see him again, sprawled in the lawn chair, legs braced in front of him. “One at a time, folks. One thing at a time.” With the other hand he twisted the wine bottle by the neck so the bottom grated circles on the wood.

“Hear that?” Ruby said. She stood up. I didn’t hear anything but when she began to dance—small, uncalculated gestures of the wrists and hips—I felt it like a heartbeat: the throb of a bass stereo deep inside some building, maybe ours. Her movements were so restrained they could barely be called dancing, too delicate to embarrass onlookers. I thought of that painting in my room, that splash of unfinished blue.

“Jagger,” I said. “Do you ever make art of your own? Art that’s not borrowed from something else? I mean reclaimed?”

He didn’t respond at first.

“He hasn’t asked you yet?” Ruby laughed, leaning briefly toward me. The light cold breeze caught a gust of her in it and pulled her away.

“Asked me what?” I asked Jagger.

“I love ears,” he said, his voice catching on some aching honesty. “All kinds of ears. I collect them. I mean I collect images of them. People think of ears all being the same but they’re all different, more even than snowflakes. I’m in love with ears. Points and edges. Translucence. Straight lines where you expect curves. They’re like shells. Or flowers. Hiding in plain sight.”

His fingers ghosted along my peripheral vision.

“So why haven’t you asked me if you can draw mine?”

“Sorry,” Jagger said, voice quiet. “Can I draw your ears sometime?”

I felt his voice in my chest. I covered my ears with both hands.
“No,” I said, and the playfulness in my voice caught on something sharp.

“Please?”

Ruby moved away from me, into her separate space.

“Okay,” I said.

The sounds of the traffic in the streets threaded through me—scraped-out brakes and rubber on asphalt and throbbing engines and the rattle and hiss of buses and electric streetcars. I heard a dog bark deep in a red throat. Doors slammed inside of me. We didn’t stay outside for much longer, but moved slowly when we went.

She says:

You… have such a lovely smile.
So pretty. You are… so handsome
in your suit. You are…

So lovely.
George had always liked train stations. The passenger trains were sleeker now than in his youth, the freight trains perhaps more muscular, but the same air of anticipation remained: the same sense of things coming and going, of suspended moments between lives. Like a spider web, he thought, like the spiders in the garden, the ones that built silken trap doors between stones and then hid under them. He’d chased up a black widow from behind the water heater that morning by accident when the pilot light went out. Its body brushed against his hand as it fell. He’d tried to crush it under his boot but the goddamned thing slipped through a crack in the steps and disappeared, its sleek black body and red hourglass somehow beautiful in its impossible artificiality. It was fifteen minutes before his hands stopped shaking enough to rekindle the pilot light.

So when he sat in the deli/convenience store in town after his weekly grocery run, he thought about trains and spiders. He found his thoughts wandered more than they used to, though he attributed that more to the lack of things to take up his time than any sign of a fading mind. His mind could still be pretty sharp for his man his age, his ideas laced with an edge of new glint. But his body didn’t feel right anymore. Before he got rid of the last mirror he owned he’d stand in front of it looking at his softened gut, his deflated chest, sagging genitals. Shoulders rounded, no longer broad and straight. Old lines and groves, patches of veins. His life limned out clearly on his body.

George sat at the deli in town and watched the trains roll past—great, rusty freight trains hauling from the cities in graffitied cars, bound for distant northern places. In his mind, they went to places beyond these tall cool trees he knew, somewhere beyond the last hunched gray town, the last stunted gray tree, into wild endless frozen wastes.
Something he wanted to know was: *How long am I going to last in this world.*

This was something George knew: *The world is aging fast.*

In the background, a televised crowd cheered as someone scored a touchdown. The thick-set cashier hissed and slammed his fist against the side of the counter. George was the only other person in the store. He watched another pack of ragged youth engraved with steel wander past the window—one of them gesticulated broadly to the buildings, or the cars, or the people around him. *More,* George thought. *And more.*

He dropped his napkin on the table, got up, and walked to the door. It jangled as he pushed it open.

“Hey,” he called out to them. “Hey, where are you going?”

A couple of them glanced back skeptically, but kept walking.

“You’re not going to get there!” he called out. “I know where you’re going and you’re not going to get there!”

His leg throbbed.


“They’re not going to get there,” George said. “The road won’t let them. I’ve watched it for years. That road doesn’t like machines. Even my old truck can barely handle it.”

“Look, man,” said the cashier. “I’ll get you a Coke or something. Maybe you should sit down for a minute or something.”

George shook his head, shook off the offer. He started walking.
16. Art is Meant to Have Meaning

It was easier to go for walks than to think about George. I visited tourist spots without a camera and drank overpriced cappuccinos. I made lists and tore them up. I thought about frogs. That is what I was doing the morning of Jagger’s art show.

At first the frogs here had not seemed so bad. When you’re shoveling fish by the bushel, when the smell of fish is oil in your hair and your skin and your nose, a frog here or there is not a big deal. I only saw them occasionally—a flash of dull green in a corner, a stubborn stone near the fire hydrant. Dogs sniffed and barked but people walked around them, satin high heels muddied by street and supple leather boots and thick skate shoes and tasseled loafers thumping heel-toe, heel-toe. You can imagine, then, the percussive underground: the echo of hundreds of thousands of feet overhead, all moving in different directions. Eventually, I wondered: does it resolve into a pattern? If you’re a frog in the pipes, breeding and breathing, do you eventually understand what your place is, how the world works around you?

I saw a man sitting on a bus bench reading a newspaper. A frog squatted on his shoe.

“Excuse me,” I said.

He didn’t respond.

“Sir, you have a frog on your shoe.”

He threw a glare at me over his paper. “Excuse me,” he said, flipping the top back up.

The frog didn’t move, but it let out a loud frog belch. The pale sac at its throat bulged.

Another time, I saw a teenage girl with one in her hair—a small tree frog this time, peering out of her stick-straight blond hair. She started screaming—that’s when I noticed—
and shaking her head around, and her friends were screaming too, until it fell: a tiny splat on the roadside. Passersby weighed and dismissed the disaster.

“Oh my God,” she kept chanting. “Oh my God.”

Ruby was an expert on invasive species. Once we took a break from fish-shoveling I accidentally got her talking about them and it was like a dam cracking. *All these small unnoticed tragedies. The importance of what was already there, what evolved there, in a place, integral to its systems.*

I had to wonder: if something new came into a place and thrived there, wasn’t that inevitable and necessary in its own way? (I stood nodding, trying to look like I was paying attention.) Fields of ice plant. Groves of eucalyptus. Why not? Wouldn’t it all balance itself out in the end?

Wasn’t it enough it was wild?

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From the Ruby Files—

*Six invasive plants and the native species endangered by them:*

1) Wild mustard (*Sinapsis arvensis*)/ San Joaquin adobe sunburst (*Pseudubahia peirsonii*)

2) Saltcedar (*Tamarix ramosissima*)/Saltgrass (*Distichlis stricta*)

3) Artichoke Thistle (*Cynara cardunculus*)/San Diego Thornmint (*Acanthomintha ilicifolia*)

4) Spotted Knapweed (*Centaurea maculosa*)/Bluebunch Wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*)

5) Dense-flowered cordgrass (*Spartina Densiflora*)/Pickleweed (*Salicornia virginica*)

6) European beachgrass (*Ammophila arenaria*)/American dunegrass (*Leymus mollis*)
Ruby said: *So much of it was brought by people.*

Would we not celebrate an orange tree in a desert?

Ruby said: *Maybe we’re not the ones who belong there either.*

My problem has always been that if I think too hard about any problem, I run up into a wall. On the other side of the wall is an argument I see just as clearly.

So all I said to her then was: “I guess what happens happens.”

This is what that dream looks like: thousands of strangers wandering the gloaming streets and alleyways among the angles of metal things men have made. They wear the relics of their lives, cameras slung like anchor weights around their necks, dresses encrusted with cheap jewelry, coats made from newspaper and studded with small expensive modes of electronic communication. In the twilight they sift, each alone, through the debris left behind by a civilization: slashed car tires, plastic six-pack rings, mostly-empty condiment bottles. There’s got to be something there, it seems. People came to this country looking for gold. They still hunt for its glimmer in the midden heaps left behind by those before them. This modern archeology.

On the morning of Jagger’s art show I went for a walk. Went for a long walk. I started up a hill and kept going, then turned left. I passed hippies and crackheads and homeless and yuppies in suits, old worn people and suspicious quiet mothers with small squalling children. I stepped through a seated pocket of dreadlocked teens, down a sidewalk spotted with dark gum. For the first time I felt I could be familiar here but how intensely too I was a stranger. I passed a man whose eyes looked ill. You can read a person’s entire life in the skin around their eyes. I passed a woman who asked me for change and a man who asked God to bless
me. The fog hung thinly over us and I felt the changes of coming and going. Everything moving.

Sirens wailed distantly. I watched a woman in a Nissan back slowly into a parallel parking spot and keep backing up, up the curb and into a wall, her tires spinning uselessly, searing the air with the stink of rubber. Onlookers watched dumbly and I kept walking, spinning uselessly too.

Whatever had happened I didn’t want to know. I was beginning to think I was imagining these lost people, these quiet endings. Death happened all the time and whether people noticed or not didn’t change it. The papers carried on with their blithe disasters and I let myself believe it wasn’t important.

I walked into Golden Gate Park. The people I saw here were different. More enclosed and distant from me. I saw a group of people in white doing tai chi. I saw a man on a crumpled newspaper whose face looked vaguely familiar. An actor or a terrorist. I saw a spiraling flower of children, running with water pistols. Their mothers sat in the shade, off-center.

I nearly stepped on the frog. I saw it as my foot was coming down, and readjusted in mid-air, taking an artificially large step. The frog didn’t move. It crouched, sleepy-eyed, near the middle of the path. I got down low and peered at it. It was alive—its throat bulged slightly, its skin glistening and stretched over an unmoving form. Someone ran past me—footsteps slowed, and then sped up again.

“What are you waiting for?” I said to the frog. I put my hand down close to it, and still it didn’t flinch. “You’re a little disturbing.”
Straightening I kept walking. Looking back I saw the frog still there, a tiny stone
guardian, marking the line between something I knew and something I didn’t.

I watched a man pushing a shopping cart through the woods.

“You know what?” I said. “We’re all ghosts.”

I suppose I knew all along I would be leaving this place, and it would change when I
was gone. I was collecting things, collecting images and sounds and storing them up. So
maybe because I was paying attention and not rushing from point to point, I noticed the frogs
before they became a nuisance, and then a problem. Not only African clawed frogs, either.
All kinds of frogs. I wanted to say: *I could have told you that.*

I began to see them even when they were trying to hide—glittering eyes in storm
drains, glistening lumps on trees, wet-skinned pebbles near my shoes. I noticed them, and
waited to see what would happen.

“Thanks for coming,” Ruby said. “I know this means a lot to Jagger.”

“Sure,” I said, trailing behind her into the building. “Is this a big deal?”

She shrugged. “It could be.”

The art show was held in a room at a downtown art school, and we had to go up three
flights and down two corridors to find it.

“Hello,” said the woman at the door, a middle-aged woman swathed in billowy prints
and laden with copper jewelry. She watched us until we each placed $5 in the jar marked
*Donations suggested.* “Hello,” she said again. “Enjoy.” Her presence seemed as unnecessary
as her eyeliner, thick and pointed.
“You made it,” Jagger said to us when we walked through the door. He looked at me.

“Thanks.”

“It’s a good turnout,” Ruby said. Looking around, I counted six people. Was that a lot?

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “But there’s some good stuff here.”

He looked worried. I left him to Ruby and wandered off to look at some of the installations. There was a series of photographs of porcelain doll parts, or dolls missing parts, posed and titled with the names of various epochs. *Pleistocene #1. Miocene #5*. Someone had made a basket and fruit entirely out of trash—down to the twist-tie flies.

I paused in front of something that appeared to be mixed media collages of things with eyeballs—coffee makers, fringed lamps, fire extinguishers, all blinking. I blinked back at them. Nearby, their creator—a pale girl with a bulbous forehead—blinked at me as well.

Jagger stood by his sad flickering montage of photos, the hair twitching and curling against a dull shower wall. People glanced at it and kept walking—I saw a few people standing and watching blankly. Everyone here must be under some kind of obligation. Who else would know or come? Jagger’s face melted and hardened with hope and disappointment warring twinly.

It always makes me sad when adults are sad like children.

We went out for a drink afterwards. Jagger drove—an old Buick sedan he usually kept wedged in their tiny garage, while Ruby parked in the driveway.

“Watch the leather,” was all he said between the time we left the building and the time we got to the bar, a noisy place midtown with an old Chicago mafia theme. Jagger
immediately drained a beer and got another. “So that went well, huh?” he said, voice pitched too high.

“Yes,” Ruby and I chorused. I sensed her looking at me and was careful not to look back.


“It takes time for these things to catch on,” Jagger said. “For people to connect to the narrative. The thematic journey.”

“Right,” said Ruby.

Jagger didn’t speak again. He studied the grain of table we sat at in the darkest corner, tracing the wood with his fingers. For a long time Ruby looked at him, her mouth twisted as though around a sour candy.

“Let’s play a game,” she said, and disappeared, and came back with a box of Jenga.

“This one is always best when we’re drinking.”

She and I played for a while, tapping rectangular blocks out from the sides and placing them on top. People had scrawled things on them. On one: Blake is a whore. On another: Blake is not a good whore. On another: Unicorns make the very best pets.

Jagger showed no interest in joining and she didn’t invite him. He had sunk into some dim well of himself beyond our reach.

“I can’t take this anymore,” Ruby said after a while.

“Take what?” It took me a minute to realize she was looking at the TV by the bar, which had turned briefly to local news, and not Jagger.

“Are you fucking blind?” She threw her arm out, nearly hitting a woman sidling past.

“The fish. The frogs. The birds.”
The news blurb had been about the fish. How Fisherman’s Wharf businesses were once again thriving as though the fish had never happened.

“What birds?” I said, carefully withdrawing a brick from the side. The structure wobbled when I placed it on top but held. I was thinking of canaries. I was thinking of the wild parakeets that lived in the city. Maybe that’s what D.G. could be. Wild.

“Mya!” she said. “The pigeons! The pigeons!”

As if her arms stretched up in some mix of supplication and disgust in St. Mark’s Square. The pigeons! They fluttered around her like road-weary ghosts. The pigeons! Even in front of a gold-gleaming cathedral it looked pathetic.

Jagger rolled his eyes at his beer.

“There’s always been pigeons,” I said. “I mean, yeah, the frogs, but I haven’t particularly noticed…” I didn’t want to say: It already happened. It happened to me.

“They’re dirty,” Ruby said. “There’s something wrong with them. I was eating lunch with Suzette down by the wharf the other week and this pigeon—its foot was all tumorous and swollen, and one of its eyes was this bloody mass—it landed on the table right there between us. Shit.” She reconsidered the block she’d been trying to remove and went for another. “And there was a whole flock of them hanging out on the sidewalk the other day with crooked wings, feathers sticking out every which way—it was like they’d all run into a big glass wall in the sky. You’d think we’d all be worried, but even if people notice we act like it’s all the same. Like we have to expect this kind of thing now. People like him,” she jerked a thumb at Jagger, “make collages of dead things but no one ever actually talks about it.”

“Ain’t it a bitch,” Jagger muttered.
Ruby swallowed the rest of her beer. It was her turn again but she didn’t seem to care. The whole tower was already full of holes—I don’t think there was another one she could have removed. “There’s something so sadly wrong with this place,” she said.

“But have you noticed anything about the people?” I asked. “Dying, I mean?”

“I knew it as soon as I saw those fish floating in the bay.”

“For no reason, I mean.”

“I just… I just want everything to be okay,” she said, and started to cry. “I want to make things better. I don’t know what to do.”

“I saw one of them,” I said. “Me. I saw one of them die. Maybe two.” I felt my heart throbbing inside my chest like a running animal.

Ruby leaned on the table. There were tears in her eyes. “I want to leave,” she whispered. “I want to go home.”

That’s the furthest I have ever felt from Rubella Gutierrez.

Reaching around her, Jagger tapped at the precarious tower we had built. He nearly got the block out before the whole thing tumbled, rattling into pieces on top of the table.

“Whoops,” he said.

Eventually we staggered back to the car. The stars burned overhead and I kept feeling like I had swallowed some, like they were stuck in my throat, scorching and cold as marbles of ice. The two of them slumped against opposite sides of Jagger’s Buick. Ruby looked ill. Jagger just miserable.

“I’ll drive,” I said.

Jagger shook his head. “No,” he said. “No, it’s my car.”
Ruby laughed, voice harsh. “It’s ancient,” she said. “I don’t know why you put up such a fuss about it.”

“It’s a good car,” he said. “It’s important to take care of good things.”

“I’ll be careful,” I said, and I was.

When we got back to the apartment the two of them stumbled into the dark. Ruby went straight into their room and did not emerge again but Jagger went to the fridge. He stared at the cool glow of it for a long time.

I lay on the couch. I did not want to sleep, not then. If Ruby was frightened too, if it was not just in my head, maybe there was something wrong.

Maybe these days I’d spent waiting—maybe I should have gone to see George the day I got here. Taken a train. Rented a car, even.

“You said I could draw your ears.”

Jagger stood next to me, eating a hunk of sourdough bread he’d slathered with margarine. I sat up, fighting the gravity of the cushions.

“Yes.”

He pulled a chair over from the table and sat a short distance away. “Just ignore me,” he said. “Move around if you want.”

“Okay,” I said, but just sat there in the cold turning of the night, letting the minutes slip by me, watching the shadows change, the moonlight blue against the yellow of the lamp.
“You have perfect ears,” Jagger said.

I blushed. “They work alright.”

“There’s no wasted space,” he said. “Artistically, every curve has a purpose. A balance.”

“That sounds like something Ruby would say,” I said.

Ruby’s sense of universal order was partly why she took so to the study of ecology. Everything had a proper place—everything was connected to everything else. I didn’t see it
that way. I followed long threads into nothing and what was there fluttering at the end of it but a bird, moving in front of me, trailing away?

“Maybe,” Jagger said, and said nothing more about my ears.

Well then, I’d take the things that couldn’t be replaced so easily. My sketchbooks. ID. Jagger, obviously.

Car keys?

I always keep them on a hook by the door. Doesn’t count.

But what if you didn’t? What if that was the one time you shoved them into the back pocket of yesterday’s jeans?

Wouldn’t that be the least of my worries?

“I think,” Jagger said. “I think there’s something missing inside of me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Maybe it’s missing inside of me too.”

“Maybe,” he said. I thought: he would love my sister if he knew her. He would admire the way she’d left, the way she cut all ties with the rest of us because she could. What else was she going to do? I could see it, looking back—she was miserable in our life, in our family. She’d gone missing, all the parts of her together. All the memories I would have had of her, gone too.

“Did Ruby tell you,” he said, “I did the Peace Corps for two years?”
“No,” I said and waited, but he was quiet.

“Are you okay, Jagger,” I said—carefully, because I really didn’t want to know.

A melancholy hovered in the room, the same darkness that lurks at the edges of fires.

I wondered about things like radon, like carbon monoxide—I don’t know what I was thinking but I was afraid of the air I was breathing.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Nothing.”

“Nothing’s not what I asked about.”

He laughed, but it was a bitter sound. “Do you know what it’s like?” he said. “There’s nothing I can do but sit here and swallow it down like pills. All of it.”

“All of what?”

“Whatever’s out there,” he said. “Everything. You take one step outside and wham, it’s all around you, digging into you with eager claws.”

“Have you been watching the news again?”

“I hit a kid,” he said.

“With a car?” My voice squeaked.

“No,” he said. “With my hand.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He seemed to find the question amusing. “Because I was angry.”

“Because…”

If you could save just one possession from a burning building, what would it be?

I wouldn’t waste my time.
“Because the kid stole my wallet, that’s why. In Bolivia. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought he was a really short man. Turned out it was a girl. Maybe twelve. I don’t hit people. She fell.”

“Jagger,” I said, after the silence had turned over a few times in my mouth. “You’re not the first to make a mistake like that.”

“Myna,” he said, “That’s not the point at all.”

“Are you really going to carry all this guilt,” I said, “Over something you can’t change? Something so—lost, really, in the cosmic scheme?”

“Welcome to the human condition,” he said, with the closest thing to a real smile I’d seen from him that night. It was broken like glass and it hurt me to see it. I wondered if he was telling me everything.

I glimpsed his sketchbook before he closed it. I saw dark hair curved behind an ear. I saw my face.

“Goodnight, Myna,” he said.
Kris—Kris is someone I met in Amsterdam—got her wallet stolen on the underground and she laughed about it the whole way back. Said she didn’t have anything in there except a five euro bill and a picture of Ethan doing his totem animal impression—which is probably true.

Kris is the kind of the person I was when I got here.

Sometimes I let myself be that kind of person anyway. For fun.

-A
17. A Conversation with Ruby

“So.”

“So.”

“Don’t get me wrong.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m totally cool with you staying here. But what happened to returning that bird?”

I watched Ruby pour spicy tomato juice into the blender. It seemed thicker than juice ought to be, thicker than blood.

“Not to point out the obvious or anything, but it’s been almost—” she glanced out the window like it was a calendar—“two weeks since you got here.”

“I’m a little stuck,” I said.

She poured some vodka in after it. “You need help? I can be pretty resourceful when the need arises.”

“That’s okay.”

She picked up the hot sauce container and shook in a substantial portion of the contents. “Why don’t you keep the bird? If someone wanted it you’d know by now. Just a sec. Blender.”

I waited until the noise had faded.

“That’s not how it’s supposed to go.”

“Ah,” Ruby said, pouring the mixture into a cup. “I see.”

Why do people of the best intention seem to infuriate me so easily?

“Want some?” she asked.
I tried a sip. Flame exploded in my mouth. “Why do you even drink this stuff?” I said, coughing.

“Hair of the dog,” she said. “It’ll toughen you up.”

“I don’t mean to be a burden,” I said. “I’ll figure it out.”

Ruby smiled. “Myna, I told you—how could you be?”
The last tangled ugly wood has a creek through the middle of it. Further down that creek funnels into a concrete drainage system but here it is still a creek. The sandy ground does not hold well to stones and it is steep and lined with roots wedged with garbage. You can tell where the highest watermark is because that’s where the beer cans and cellophane wrappers and chunks of styrofoam stop. The plants here are fibrous and dense and some of them smell bad. The rusty remnants of barbed wire that once lined the creek in some places run in and out of soil, coil around trees. The ground is mud and oak leaves and the occasional dead thing.

You like it here because it is secret and dark and a good hiding place for the things you collect. There are so many things to collect, too, because there are so many things people leave behind.

One day there is an old man inside your cave. He is very, very old. Older than anyone else you’ve ever seen. The skin hangs on him like empty cloth and there is not much of him left inside. He stares straight ahead and rarely speaks. He needs a haircut.

“Hello?” He says. “Hello? I don’t see very good ‘ny more.”

You’ve seen him before but never in your cave. The dog doesn’t care for him either way but the dog seems indifferent to most people. The dog lies sphinx-like and waits, looking outward.

“Hi,” you say, and the old man cackles with more spaces in his mouth than teeth.

“I knew it!” he says. “I knew someone was there.”

“Yep,” you say. “That’s me, I’m here.”

“I knew it. I knew someone was there.”
You ask him what he’s doing here and he starts humming Beatles songs. So you sit off a ways and forget him in playing with the dog. The dog loves to chase sticks and will disappear trembling into the bushes, *crash crash, crash*, and emerge grinning with a stick that may or may not be the one you threw.

You don’t mind the old man being around. He doesn’t take the things important to you. He doesn’t take anything. He’s just there.

“Hey,” you say. “Do you know they’re going to build here?”

“Hmm-hmmm hmm hmm,” he says, squinting out of his gapped smile. “Like pigs from a gun.”
18. The Birdfall

One of the most disturbing things about the birdfall was how easy it was to ignore. You hear about birds plummeting to earth, whole flocks at a time, and people talk about it energetically for a few weeks before returning other headlines. (But not about how twelve people now had died for reasons no one knew, quietly within the sight of strangers. I noticed. I read the obituaries.) The birdfall was one of those things that slips under your skin and vanishes except for a resonance, a persistent sense of discord.

After Ruby left that morning after the art show—“A special event,” she said and didn’t invite me (Jagger already long gone)—I opened D.G.’s cage. Then I opened all the windows, opening the blinds and wrenching up the rattling windows in their wooden frames so sunlight streamed in unfiltered.

“There,” I said to the little yellow bird. “Your call.”

After reading the obituaries I got out the crossword. Type of fire. Five letters. I did not look at D.G. I heard no sounds.

The first bird fell like a drop of ink. Unsure of what I had seen from the corner of my eye but troubled nonetheless I went to the window. The second one dropped straight into the street, disappearing under the front wheel of a car. I heard no sound but winced anyway.

I grabbed the spare key and ran downstairs.

Sparrows skitter about picnic tables all the time. There is regularity to the presence of small dark shapes in midair. But the stillness of the bird near the curb: a starling on its belly, beak arched up and open, eyes wide and staring. That was not normal. It seemed dazed and not too far from death.
“Oh,” said a bent old woman, stepping around it. “What’s wrong with it? Is it hurt?
Or friendly?”

“I think it’s hurt,” said her companion, guiding her.

“That’s too bad.”

I saw another one then, back in the shade. It lay in the same manner, head stretched back, feet pinned underneath it, wings held close. Like it had forgotten how to fly.

One bird is sick. Two birds is troubling. Two birds is an epidemic.

I saw another fall—at least I think I did—out of the corner of my eye, a small dark blur stone-plummeting. I thought it was dead but then it twitched, pulling itself in spasms, and tilted its gapped beak up. Were they thirsty? Did birds get heatstroke?

And it was hot out—heat beaded on my forehead and made my clothes thick and scratchy. I squinted at the sky.

“Excuse me. You have the time?”

A man and a woman in their late thirties had stopped beside me. His eyes crinkled at some private joke. In them I saw the slippery bodies of dead fish. Nothing in there but my heart throbbing in empty space. He was still short but thinner and his hair had darkened again, and he had that same direct, amused stare. They both wore pale jeans with holes in the knees and t-shirts with the logos of bands I’d never heard of. The woman wore glasses now, thick black plastic frames—she’d grown shorter and darker and no longer scornful though her eyes were still bright. In her eyes I saw the bright glow of canaries and hunger for canaries and my insides hollowed out. I could have sworn: behind the disguises of their faces they were the same. Nearly. Nearly.
I felt myself slipping. A bus roared up next to us, paused with a heavy gasp, and roared away.

I remembered working in the darkroom, back when I still took photos. I remembered taking the film out in utter darkness. Loading the film onto the spool by feel. Nothing as loud as my breath in my ears. Then, later, exposing the prints to light—the longer the exposure the darker the print. And I would block the light to make dark sections lighter, and lengthen the exposure of lighter sections to make them darker. Dodging and burning. Each name almost the opposite of what you’d expect.

After brushing up against them time and again, I was beginning to see the shape of them. I felt that I had names for them now.

Burn

and Dodge.

“Almost 1:30,” I said.

He smiled. “Thanks,” he said. Already turning away. I watched them until I was sure they were leaving. Beyond them the last one fell, too far for me to see where.

I saw Burn and Dodge standing on the corner. He had his hand on her arm, she held hers palm-up. She gazed up at the sky as if waiting for rain, with the same keenness.

I didn’t want to see this.

“You look pensive,” Jagger said behind me. I turned, the afternoon sun hot in my eyes.

“You’re back early.”

“Not really,” he said, looking at me strangely. “I get off at one. Everything okay?”

“I’m fine.”
Five letters, I thought. Enemy.

Jagger followed me back upstairs, never asking if I was coming or going. When I opened the door D.G. was perched at the edge of the kitchen table, eyeing some abandoned breadcrumbs.

“Better put him away before Ruby sees him,” Jagger said, and frowned. “Better close the windows too, or he’ll get out.”

“I know,” I said and walked to each one, sliding them shut with a dull rush of air, closing the city out again.

And that was more or less it for the birdfall. It wasn’t dense or numerous enough to warrant even a blurb the next day. Maybe I was the only person who had noticed anything. Maybe I was making it up. Maybe all I was seeing was my own fears—walking, falling, dying around me. I checked the news every morning now, took my dread to bed with me at night. Wanting to know: what else did I need to worry about. Had anyone already vindicated my terror.

Nope. Nothing.

Sometimes I allowed myself to believe that was a good thing.

Later:

“Are you okay?”

I sat on the couch facing east, knees drawn up to my chin. I didn’t need to look to know it was Jagger.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Dreaming.”

“Couldn’t sleep?” He sat at the other end of the couch, facing me.
“I don’t sleep very well anymore.”

“I’m worried about you,” he said. He leaned forward, hands on his knees.

My heart expanded, constricted, pushed blood through my body, drew it back.

“I’m okay.”

The gravity of the room had shifted. It spun on a crooked axis swooping further and further from where it was supposed to be. The weight of objects changes, in moments like these. Another world pulled my legs out long—another world pushed his weight down to mine. “All but the smallest of things,” I said, “Could pull another into orbit around it.”

Jagger’s breath on my ear. “Are you awake?”

I blinked up out of dreaming. “Yes,” I said. “I think so.”

And later:

I sat on the toilet and stared at the shower. I’d stumbled here with my aching bladder in my mid-sleep haze, still tangled in a dream I couldn’t remember. I slouched on the toilet with my arms dangling between my knees and stared drunkenly at Jagger’s shower art.

I did feel drunk. Fevered. Tonight the lines of the hair seemed to sway on their own. When things seem to have an agenda I watch out. I always know it’s an agenda I won’t like.

If I looked at it the right way I saw shapes in it. The most prominent one was that of a bird. A canary, or a sparrow. It seemed to fly through a tangle of hair, or brambles. Its wings dipped and bobbed. Its head jerked stop-motion. Then the wall—I have no other way to explain it—stretched into three dimensions, like one of those Magic Eye posters they used to hang on beige walls in pediatricians’ offices, a blur of static that you’d stare and stare at until
something resolved. A giraffe. The New York skyline. A school of dolphins. But there was a
gummier quality here, a stickiness, a sense of things not quite filling the space they were in.

    Each hair was a thread, some stretching back into whiteness. I stood, hiked up my
shorts, reached into it—toward the bird.

    My hand went into the tangle of hair. It went numb to the wrist for a moment, then a
warmth rushed into it. My hand had become something apart from me. I became aware of my
forearm as a series of lines, as the parts it was made up of rather than any concrete whole. I
watched it reach for the bird, like trying to catch a tadpole through the distortion of water.
My fingers groped, separate from me, wriggling like fat white worms. I touched something
that felt like thread, or sinew.

    I yanked my hand back. For a moment it seemed like the light had gone out. My hand
throbbed. I slumped against the wall and sank to the floor, dizzy and weak as though I had
the flu. Maybe I did, or worse. Maybe now it was my turn to die. Birds fluttered through the
spots in my mind.

    Through the wall, Ruby and Jagger were talking in raised, muffled voices. I was a kid
again, listening to my parents fight.

    So, then: I stepped all the way through, following the bird into darkness.
The Place of Forgotten Things

What it was like—as near as I could name it—was traversing gaps in memory, holding myself between two moments and filling in the space with a story I told myself. They entangled me, these threads, like haphazard webs of spiders, but they were also my only guides. Fighting them bound me closer to one place and I wanted to see more. I could sense how they thickened, how they came together, how they bound shapes into the shadows of them. A wind began to move among them, lending its motion to the threads. I saw a horizon, the sense of a landscape, a little gold bird bobbing toward it.

Then I lost sight of him. “Dear George,” I called, and my voice echoed back to me. “George. George.”

That was my first journey into the place of forgotten things. It’s not hard to find once you’ve been there. Rather harder to get away.

My dreams that night were vivid and dark.
A List of Dreams

1. I dreamed Ruby was a bird. Some kind of wild goose, thick-feathered and long-necked. She flew above a long ocean, but no matter how hard her wings beat she kept sinking, until her feet skimmed the top of the water. And then she plunged underneath, and she was still flying but more slowly, sinking deeper as if the difference between air and water was definite but negligible.

(The difference between me and the other side of this page is definite but negligible.)

2. Once I dreamed Clary was a bird. She flitted from twig to rail, never stopping for long. She clung to the branches of cold pines in high winds, her wings nevertheless held out like sails. In the calms she nudged pieces of soil and fallen leaf apart, looking for worms or something buried.

(That dream was brief and scattered, poorly remembered.)

3. Sometimes I dreamed I was a bird. It was never a comfortable thing—not like a normal flying dream, where all is open and wind rushes your face. My skin pricked with the ends of feathers and my face felt hard and speechless. I have no idea if I was a large bird or small: I had nothing to gauge my size against. The plain below me stretched wide and unbroken, an endless field of brown grass. The ground was poison to me.

(I never liked those dreams.)
George

It came in the night when he was most unsure of himself and his own strength. He never felt less like a man and more like a nothing when lying in bed, a nothing with no body to protect him. Recently he’d become aware of the hollowness in his own body—a subterranean wind rushing through his organs, his bones. A bleak place, he thought, where nothing lived—only muscle memories of the things he’d made (stronger than the memories of the things he’d broken), of people he’d embraced (very few), of hard journeys up mountains and down ravines he barely remembered anymore with his mind. His body was his last bastion of memory now and he was losing it too.

It came in the night—as such things do—while he listened to the sounds outside his walls: the creak of old trees, the rustle of nocturnal animals. He didn’t hear it so much as feel it moving heavily through the yard: an absence of sound, something out of deeper spaces than his own.

He did not know the words to banish it. It snuffled around the house, crawled ponderously up onto the wall—paused—and lowered itself again. When it moved closest he thought he heard something in its wake: a brief gurgling, water draining away in caverns far beneath the earth’s surface.

As a boy, before they’d moved out to the coast with his stepfather, he and his mother had lived north and east, in a region more raw and new than this one. The landscape harsher. Volcanic. Empty. The shrubs there were stunted and hardy. The pine trees fought for every gnarled inch of height. One of his favorite pastimes then had been exploration—that’s all he ever wanted to be, an explorer. (Then, by the time he was old and settled enough to remember that dream, he’d found others had gone and done all of the exploring for him.)
(Then, by the time he was old enough to realize he might have been wrong, he was too stuck in his ways to ever return to that dream.)

Often he had to look close to find anything new—small, strange animals he didn’t know. Crawling things. Moths. Snakes. But every once in a while he discovered something wonderful—the entire bleached skeleton of a horse, with the great long skull and wide open sockets, or an arrowhead chipped from obsidian, in the shallows of a streambed.

Once too he’d found a cave.

There were caves that were known of, shown to him, warned about, but this one he found on his own, unexpected. Hiking back in the hills he discovered the mouth of it hidden in the shadow of a boulder and overgrown with grasses. Wide though, especially once he cleared some of the tangled growth away, cutting his hand on thorns in his eagerness. He still had the scar, one tiny white fleck among many.

Sucking on the cut to close it, he clambered in. A short tunnel led back—maybe two feet across at its narrowest—then twisted up and widened and he emerged into a sense of space and openness. Cautiously he straightened. The light that entered with him illuminated little. He reached up with his hands and encountered a damp ceiling of rough stone.

“Hello?” he said. His voice did not echo—it was muffled almost as soon as he spoke like a hand had clamped over his mouth at the last minute. He thought he heard something rustle—and incongruously thought of his mother in the kitchen, her skirt sloshing around her ankles.

He ran home, dodging his mother’s questions, and returned with a lantern and rope. The tools of an explorer. Something burning in his chest felt like adulthood. Remembering it
as a man on his fading edge he felt ashamed of his own certainty. His fearlessness. Whether or not those were things to be ashamed of he didn’t know. At the time he’d been young.

He’d been half-afraid the cave would not be there when he returned but he found it and climbed in, lantern first. The light flickered and bulged on the walls, throwing his shadow into crevices. It was cold. Much colder than outside. The untouched kind of cold. He went up again to the place where he’d stood before—there was a shelf about knee high, in a low chamber. He crawled across it and dropped down into a lower tunnel that moved downward and then straight and then opened up in front of him—a high chamber and broad, at least it seemed to him then, though it was probably no more than twenty feet at its longest point. He stood there a moment, in the stillness—then the lantern slipped from his numb fingers and snuffed out.

There was no light and no sound. He had never been in a place so quiet or so empty. His world narrowed to the simplest of factors. His body was a worm’s body: he experienced the world as a worm must, aware only of its own physical existence, its drives, its marrow. Gray spots writhed inside his brain. And he saw a monstrous shape—the great ancient denizen of his cave breathing, moving, opening its jaws to swallow him with its silence. His breath came short in his lungs. Teeth sank into him, the bite of a clouded darkness.

He panicked. He left the lantern, and scrambled back the way he’d come.

Released from the darkness, something in his chest burst. His knee was bleeding in the light. His face was sticky with tears but both sadness and joy, in that moment, had been scorched out of him.
He remembered this place later not as someplace he’d lived but as someplace he’d dreamed about. He had no ties to it but memory. It was a different place. A different time. The world he lived in now was strange and familiar and ending. The thing moving past him through the night was born of the darkness of that cave. The darkness of that cave with him still in it.

Diminishing.
19. The Way Things Fall Apart You Didn’t Know Could Break

I awoke the next day feeling shaky, my clothes chilly and damp with old sweat. My feet were dirty and sore, as if I had been walking for a long time. I had the distinct sensation of grass between my toes but there was none.

I padded out into a quiet apartment. Ruby and Jagger were both gone. I felt out of place here. The apartment breathed a story that wasn’t mine, except for D.G. fluttering in his cage—if the bird could be called mine. The bird was, at least, the story I was trying to finish (I felt a rush of guilt—I hadn’t tried very hard), just as all this unfinished art was Jagger’s own bizarre archaeology. Ruby’s… Ruby’s was out there, trying to stitch together a broken world.

I stepped out briefly to stretch my legs and get some coffee from the place on the corner—I needed different air. Returning I found Jagger sitting cross-legged on the kitchen table, balancing a soda straw on his nose.

“You’re back early,” I said.

“I got fired,” he said.

“For what?”

“For not being friendly enough.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing, apparently.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Ruby came in almost right on my heels.

“You’re back early,” Jagger said.

“I took a half-day. What’s with you?”
“Nothing,” he said. “Apparently.”

Ruby stood there with a resigned expression, watching him balance the straw on his nose. “Is there any tempeh left?” she asked finally.

“No,” said Jagger, not moving.

Ruby let something like a snarl cross her face and went to the fridge. She took out the ingredients for peanut butter sandwiches with controlled but violent motions.

Everything was rotting around me. And I was paying so much attention to the silence I didn’t even notice D.G. was gone until I went to his cage to refill his water dish and saw there was no bird inside, nothing, not even one last yellow feather, and I stood there utterly unable to think. Unable to even begin to comprehend what that meant I had to do.

“Where is he?” I said. “Jagger, did you let him out?”

“Where is who?” Ruby said, and walked into the other room.

“My bird?” There was no reply.

I looked for D.G. all over the apartment. Neither Jagger nor Ruby spoke to me or each other. He did not move from the table and she did not leave her bedroom. They were furious at each other, or maybe at me. In any case I was caught between them, a particle snagged in an electric flood.

I left.

The gravity of cities led me downtown—like the nucleus of a galaxy the center radiates and we like moths are drawn to it. I found myself in brighter places where the lights shine ceaselessly and the heat and noise of traffic amplified my fears, my loss. I was looking for a canary on the surface of the sun—one bright yellow spot in a landscape of fire.
I heard commotion, and voices. A raised voice penetrates—many together kindle a heat in my chest that is not quite fear and not quite ferocity. An unfamiliar alertness I do not seek out. I would have avoided that street if it was not for the glimmer of yellow I thought I saw. Whether real or imagined I can’t be sure. Though more likely it was wishful thinking I still allowed myself to believe it was D.G., I had found him, and he had somehow led me here.

I’m not sure what they were protesting—the hundreds of people I came upon, all with their backs to me. They’d taken up all of Union Square, an oceanic roar rising from unsynchronized voices all yelling at once. Through gaps in the crowd I saw the riot police, some of them with dogs too still on the leash. The crowd swayed toward the police and then fell back. I could feel the crush of that motion in my chest. People stood on walls, clambered up palm trees. Something was about to happen.

But the something I saw was not that. Near the rear of the crowd, about twenty feet from where I stood, I saw a young man collapse, going limp in the arms of his friends. They bent over him, the tones of panic overcoming anger. “Brett,” they kept saying. “Brett, what’s wrong man, what’s wrong.” I’d seen it: the utter bonelessness of his body as he fell and life had fled him.

The crowd roared on and I sank away. I heard another cry, a sudden scramble, but I did not turn around. I was too frightened. I did not want to know.

_Bird._

_Bird?_ 

_Where are you bird..._
If I didn’t find the bird, none of this would matter.

When I was three I had a stuffed penguin (penguins do not fly, ergo, it was not a bird). I carried this penguin everywhere with me, apparently—he was about the size of a football and wore a black bow tie. I think I liked the awkwardness of him, the way—as a penguin—he was forced to waddle down halls, and could not, though he tried tirelessly, navigate the stairs. Eventually he went onto a shelf and then into a box for my young cousin, winding up as a chew toy for their dog.

The tragedy hadn’t hit me until now, and maybe that’s because it was too mundane to be tragic. Or maybe its mundanity was its own tragedy. And whatever tragedy I had left behind had become mundane too.

All I had was a yellow bird and I saw no trace of it. The only birds I saw were dark, the color of oil, or pigeons the color of smog. A few drab sparrows darted, unattached electrons zigzagging across open air. No canary. No D.G.

What was I supposed to do, without the bird?

I stopped walking. My feet rooted to the concrete. I could not take another step. A boy in tight jeans and a sleeveless shirt, his hair gelled into a disheveled faux-hawk, came downstairs in the house next door, locked the door, stared me down, and started walking the other day, a familiar emptiness to his jaunty stride.

This was something I’d always felt. There were people out there, people who bore more than the common kinship to me. People who were pieces of me I’d left behind, I’d collected, souls sharing electrons between them like atoms, binding together into something more than a brick, more than a person. Maybe I was a piece of them too.

*D.G.,* I thought. *Please come back. We have to go.*
Standing there, I had the strange feeling this had already happened, was going to happen again, and was still happening somewhere.

“Myna.”

What was it about this city?

Stolen words.

“Myna.”

Empty light. People who cannot share their uncommon thoughts.

“Myna, are you deaf?”

“What?”

“Would you come back already? Your stupid bird is stuck in the bathroom, and Jagger’s flipping the fuck out thinking it’s messed up his nasty shower art.”

Lost seconds.

I blinked at Ruby standing in front of me. “Coming.”

Time is running out in a timeless world.

Makes you wonder what will happen when it does.

Walking back into Ruby and Jagger’s apartment meant walking into a blurry haze of hurt, of people falling away from each other, discovering the ways they did not fit together.

D.G. fluttered around the guest bathroom, weary and ruffled. When I opened the door he spiraled upward in a disheveled yellow puff, a berserker dandelion.

I tried to catch him with both hands, which he darted away from. Neither of us voiced anything. We danced around the room in a strange and necessary silence.
Ruby came to the door with the open cage in front of her like her belly held open and D.G. flew in. I guess he was tired. I stood there panting, with Ruby staring at me.

“Are you okay?” she said.

“Sure.” I felt weary, distanced from everything around me. My mind was somewhere in the future, or maybe in the past. I tried to focus. I watched the square of blue behind her head. It began to drift left, and then right. Sunlight flashed through it, glinting off some metallic surface.

Jagger stood in a pile of broken paper maché eggs, methodically peeling them apart. He glanced toward me, glanced away. Jagger the chinchilla also looked morose. He drooped in his cage, flat on his belly in sawdust. D.G. was the only one who seemed unaffected. He tucked his head under his wing, and to all appearances went to sleep.

“I’m leaving,” I said before I could change my mind. “Ruby, can I borrow your car?” Ruby looked affronted. “Where are you going?” she said, and I knew no matter what I said the answer would be no.

“North.”

“North?” Jagger laughed across the room. A coolness had settled over him, an underwater stillness. Whatever his problem was with Ruby—they still weren’t speaking to each other—I felt I, too, had angered him unknowingly.

“Yes,” I said, running my fingers along the edge of the table. “North.”

“You can have my car,” Jagger said. “I don’t want it anymore.”

“I can pay you a little,” I said. “I’ll return it.”

“I said I don’t want it anymore.”

“What are you talking about,” Ruby said. “You love that car.”
“That,” Jagger said, “Shows exactly how much you know.” And he chucked his keys at me. I caught them.

I moved in whispers, afraid that Jagger could change his mind. I got my stuff out of the bedroom and went to collect the bird. Normally he flapped when I approached him but now he watched me. Like all the wild birds I usually ignored, finches and sparrows fluttering at my feet, watching me for crumbs, for inattention. They always moved when I looked away and I had the feeling D.G. was waiting to do the same.

I picked up his cage and he chirped—loudly.

I felt the city churning around me. In the streets below cars honked and screeched and the clamor of voices rose and fell, punctuated by the hollow bark of a dog, the crying of a child. The city didn’t want me anymore. The two people I knew best in this place didn’t want me anymore. I had broken something with my dreaming.

“If you need me to stay,” I said. “I will.”

But neither of them spoke. If I had wished to stay, I should have said so a long time ago.

“I guess we’re going then,” I said.

“Do you know what happened to the shower?” Jagger said.

“I didn’t do anything.” I went into the bathroom and pulled back the curtain. The hair had all been washed off the walls, and lay in a twisted mat on the bottom of the tub.
“I didn’t do anything,” I said again, returning.

“See,” Jagger said to Ruby. “See.”

“Oh, get off your high horse,” Ruby said. “Like anyone appreciated your hair art anyway.”

They seemed small and ghoulish sitting there, sniping at each other. I felt something creeping into me, some bruised and dark and groping shape like ivy with whispery leaves.

*Remember me?* It said.

“Come on, D.G,” I said to him, and as we walked through the door he let out a trill, louder than I thought such a little bird capable of. A knife blade of sound: cutting me loose from the thing behind me, threatening to engulf me as it had engulfed my friends. I wondered if I too was lingering, some dark presence in the room driving the two of them apart. Maybe I hoped for it and maybe I feared it and maybe I would never be able to tell the difference.
George

There were too many kinds of cat food to choose from. He looked at the gleaming cans and the bags of dry food and could not decide which fish flavor the cat would like the best. Probably she would prefer something chipmunk or gopher flavored, but the fat white cats glaring from the labels clearly did not.

They were both too pedestrian for this grocery store. But all he wanted was the simple things and only the biggest stores carried those anymore. The problem was they carried everything else too, so he had to sift through all the sugary, marshmallow-laden cereals and the tiny five-dollar boxes of organic granola to find something simple.

He was not inherently a simple man but he wished the world would be more simple sometimes. The store was too crowded, the streets were too crowded. There were too many dazed tourists stumbling in and out of RVs and too many dreadlocked hippies young and aging sitting on benches and at tables and watching like waiting for something to happen. He began to feel like he was waiting for something to happen too. And the lean mottled mutt tied in the shade outside the door was panting and waiting for something to happen. And the birds were all skating the lowest altitudes watching for something to happen.

On his way home, the highway drenched in orange by the low-slung sun, he passed a car stopped by the side of the road. Three figures stood by. They were young and he could see in that heartbeat of passage they were puzzled and stressed and needed help. So he slowed and stopped because that was what he was supposed to do.

This was not the first time this had happened. There was something about his part of the woods—something that kept machines from acting like they were supposed to. The more complicated the machine, the more pronounced the failure. And this was not the first time he
had found people standing like this helpless beside the vehicles that had carried them here. Especially in recent memory.

“You kids okay?” he said. They eyed him dubiously but smiled—three wispy kids in their early twenties, two guys and a girl, clearly not much accustomed to being unable to move.

“We’ve got a flat, is all,” the girl apologized. “But the reception up here is so bad.”

“Got a spare?”

“Well, yes,” said the one who appeared to be her boyfriend, and George could see it gnawing at him—a sharp-toothed little failure, clinging to his neck. “Not sure how to get it on though.”

“I’ll help,” he said, because that was the kind of man he was, and he did. He hid how much effort it cost him. How much age had subtracted from him.

“Thanks, man,” the third boy said, in the way that made it clear George was all men to him and all men would be greeted the same.

“The name’s George,” he said.

“Thanks, George,” the boy said.

There was camping gear in the back of the sedan so he asked them where they were going.

They looked at each other. “You know,” said the girl, raising an eyebrow. “Around.”

“That spare won’t hold you very long,” he said. “You should probably head back to town, get a real tire on there.”

“No problem,” the boyfriend said. “We’re not going far.”
If he was that kind of man he would wish all the aid he had given them undone. But he had never been that way and never would.

There was little to do in his house that evening. He did not make much of a mess and dishes for one were easy to wash up. The smell of the ocean was strong in the trees. He walked out in the dusk and stood at the edge of the woods and watched the deer come out into the yard, ghostly, delicate shapes. They seemed pieces of the trees themselves, loose and still unsure of their new freedom. Instead of chasing them out he watched them. All it would take was a yell, a few stones, but he watched them. Three, four deer. He watched them nose through the lettuces, tongue the easy fruits from the low vines. They liked the delicate tops of turnips, the new leaves of cabbages.

Their heads went up all of a moment. They watched the woods in a direction he was not in. A low blur shot out of the trees toward them and they scattered. The explosion of motion, the silence of it—he felt the moment being torn out of the night, the hard rending of fabric, straight through his chest, the muted thunder of hooves, the traces of white in their coats disappearing like stars behind the clouds, and a pain in his chest ripped through him, and the blur didn’t pause but raced right through the hole it left, into the trees, following the deer into the silence they took with them, into the promise of blood.

The trees reached out for him and pulled him down.

He awoke in sunlight.
20. North

To me, crossing the Golden Gate Bridge has always felt like flying. Most bridges feel flat and hard and low—a road across water but still just a road. From the Golden Gate you see the whole city in the sun all silver and glass spilling down the hills into the water. The hard barnacle-like encrustation of Alcatraz. The dark gray limb of the Bay Bridge in the distance. And the blue water dotted with white scraps of sails. The broad shipping barges from China. It was easier than before to leave that sad city behind. I moved into richer greener lands and allowed the illusion of peace to wash the bad taste from my mouth, the film of something left unfinished, unsaid, unsolved.

D.G. began singing as we drove north from city, like some knot had come loose in his throat. I had never heard him sing like this before. He sat beside me in his cage strapped in the front seat, rocking on his perch, seesawing in our motion, singing out bright.

It felt strange to be behind the wheel of a car again. There were choices now: freeway exits, little roads snaking away from the one I was on, disappearing into trees. Little houses disappeared into trees. Little people disappeared into trees. Then the trees disappeared into buildings, into roads, into people.

We drove across the bridge and down into the hills and out through the outlying northern towns into a burnt sienna world full of golden grass and gnarled oak trees, the kind of world I had grown up in and would probably never leave.
M-

There’s something reassuring about German cities. They have economy and shape. And still there are places to explore, shattered relics of other years left hidden in dusty pockets. I wander feeling like I’m climbing mountains. The same rising sensation in my chest.

I met Dah-vid on the U-bahn today. David has freckles and likes to ski. You would like him. Or maybe you wouldn’t. We went to a beer garden because he said all tourists had to go. Because he called me a tourist I called him an asshole. He asked me where I was from and I said Kansas.

Sometimes I think I’d like to come home. But then I remember what home was like and some part of me turns sour and dies. Strip malls and food wrappers in the gutters and that depressed self-satisfaction hanging like smog over everything. There’s no such thing as home, Myna. You’ll understand that one day if you don’t already.

-A
The Place of Forgotten Things

The beginning place is endlessly unwritten. Those that move through it gather what they can while the world unravels. Sand hisses sideward through the hollow bodies of old houses and cars. Cacti hunch and snarl where their roots can delve water. Water is one of the great secrets: never lingering long on the surface but oozing, flooding, rumbling, pouring when it comes. For us there was nothing to hold to.

You are unwanted here. Wanting, too, is a lost thing.

We come great distances to see this place surrounded by desert. The mountains are built of fallen castles and gray-wood shacks, of crumbling marble facades and huts woven of the reeds by rivers that have gone elsewhere. The trees in the valleys here are made of the things made by people—the polished forks, the knitted scarves, the initials carved into picnic tables. Empty husks of clothing rattle like leaves in the wind. Sometimes a small bird flies up at the sky, startled, and spirals away.

I walk through these forests of forgotten things looking for anything familiar. I find a stuffed penguin I used to play with and a stained tablecloth I inherited from my great grandmother, relegated to the bottom of a box.

The earth here is hard as clay.
I arrived at Ukiah in the late afternoon and checked into a motel. I peered out the heavy hotel curtain—it smelled of dust and lemon cleaner—at the gray outside. Were all hotel rooms decorated in the same flowery palette of muted blues, greens, pinks, and beige? It looked like a jungle drained of death and hunger.

Mom called. I answered more to shut the phone up than anything and immediately wished I hadn’t.

“Myna,” Mom said, her voice syrupy sweet even garbled by the speakerphone. “How are you? I haven’t heard from you in ages.”

And I knew something was wrong. “Sorry,” I said into the emptiness of the room. “I’m fine.”

“I wish you would return my calls.”

Guilt like a steamroller. “I’m sorry,” I repeated, flattened. “I’ve been… busy.”

“You need to come home, Myna. Your father’s not doing too well.”

I opened the curtain to let in a little light. “What do you mean?” Ice water trickled through my organs. “Is he getting worse?”

“It’s getting… more pronounced.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not that he’s sick, exactly.”

“I’m confused.”

“He stopped moving. He stopped doing anything. He doesn’t read. He only eats if I feed him like a child. He’ll watch TV if I turn it on in front of him but I don’t know if he’s
actually seeing it. They’ve been calling from work and I don’t know what to tell them. I just don’t know.”

A couple was fighting in the cab of the Dodge truck parked in the lot below my window. I couldn’t hear anything they were saying but the volume on their hands and faces was cranked way up. She kept pointing south with one bangled wrist, her chin thrust in his direction. He’d put his thick hands on the steering wheel, staring straight ahead. Then he’d explode, throwing up his arm in a broad arc. An old woman on the sidewalk gawked at them.

“For God’s sake, Myna, are you even listening?”

“What?”

“I’m ashamed of you. Your father—”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay. I get it. Dad’s depressed. Take him to a psychologist. Go to couple’s counseling or something.”

“He’s in the hospital. I didn’t have any other choice.”

“What?”

“Whatever you’re doing at school it cannot be this important.”

_How do you know_, I wanted to say. I also wanted to say, _I know, I know_.

“Come home. Your father needs to see you.”

I don’t think she was lying. But I might as well have been on the Alaskan tundra for how capable I felt of turning around.

“I can’t, Mom. Not right now. I’ll be home soon. Dad will be fine.”

“I can’t believe you are saying this to me,” Mom hissed into the phone. “Myna, this is your dad.” She hung up on me. She’d never done that before. Increasingly I was beginning to
see my mother as she had been her whole life, and not the mother I knew. I wasn’t sure I liked her.

I remained at the window. The couple appeared to resolve their argument and the truck squealed out into the street. The old woman continued walking at a snail’s crawl out of sight.

Part of me would be relieved to have a legitimate excuse to go back. But there was nothing I could do to help my dad. What could I do but stand there and be useless? Here. Here was something I could do. I could help Pops finish something. I could leave some chain unbroken.

I couldn’t put everything I felt into words but it made the decision easy, and I didn’t care, then, if it was a mistake.

I ordered a pizza.

That done I checked the white pages for anyone whose first name was George. I sat on the bed and called every George in the phone book.

“Hello,” they said.

“Hi, is George there? It’s about a bird,” I said.

I’d get one of several responses:

1. Click.

2. “Sorry, wrong number.” Click.


4. “What? What bird? Who is this?” Click (me.)

5. “Danielle/Erice/Padma, I told you to stop calling like this.” Click.
6. “Leave me out of your drug-running schemes, young lady.” Click. (I only got that one once.)

At first I was ashamed of calling. I didn’t want people to think I was crazy. When eventually I realized most of them wouldn’t think twice about it the calls became a kind of game. Who would say what. I stopped expecting to get the George I was looking for. It was a matter of eliminating options.

After fifty calls or so the pizza guy came and I gave up. I spent the rest of the time lying heavy-lidded on the bed. Exhaustion crept in. I wiped greasy fingers on my jeans and flipped through channels. Each one was some exaggerated reach for laughter or sadness. I stopped on the news.

I had left an imploding world behind me. The news stories were all about other places. There were things like elections. And riots. And financial crisis. Weary serious people explained worst-case scenarios. As for the city itself, the protests had come and faded. Analysts waited for the next disaster. Everyone, always, bided their time.

The real stories, the things I had noticed, were limited to a short quote from a harried-looking scientist. This unsettling trend, he called it. Apparently there had been some mass death event among the African clawed frogs in Golden Gate Park—the unkillable, the survivors. He was the only one who saw anything to be concerned about. They’d been trying to get rid of those frogs for years.
I was glad to be out of it. I couldn’t solve the world’s problems and I sure as hell didn’t have the energy to try.

When I finished eating I padded into the bathroom and showered and brushed my teeth naked still dripping all over the floor. There was mildew in the caulking by the tub and near the ceiling. I stared up at it with a mouth full of foam and then spat into the sink. Just one more thing to spray with something toxic and then quietly ignore.

Clean and clothed and ready for bed I poured seed into D.G.’s bowl. He kept chirping at me, twisting his head around to watch me with one eye.

“What?” I said.

I crawled back into bed, lowering the volume on the TV to a comfortable drone. Secret audiences laughed themselves to tears. I let the flickering colors and buzz of static lull me into a stupor and drown me.

In the corner, D.G. stretched out a wing and watched me.

Sometimes I imagined that I was the bird.

Sometimes I imagined that things would be different if I was a bird.
You are following her again. She doesn’t know you’re there or else she does and doesn’t care. She has started collecting sunflowers every day. She goes to the stand on the corner and buys one for the bouquet she will bring to the man at the end of the week. She stops in a store with a sunflower-print apron in the window. She eats sunflower seeds by the handful, salted shells and all. She reads books about cancer and other illnesses and you hear her exclaiming to new people every time: how sad it is such a good thing as the sun could cause so much harm. Isn’t that strange? Too much of a good thing. She always says it the same way.

She wears black skirts or pants always and often a shirt of some vivid color. She favors maroon. She gets mad at people and throws things. She bends paperclips into strange shapes and leaves them places. You follow after her, collecting them.

When you have a full bag—a greasy paper bag from Burger King that still smells of fried potatoes—you take it back to your hiding place to show the old man.

The old man hasn’t moved. He still sits there at the edge of your cave, knees up to his chest, like that’s the only way he knows how to sit. He sticks his lips out. “Sounds like Cowboys and Indians outside.”

You show him your collection of paper clips

“Huh?” he says. “There a burger in there?” He rummages around in the clips and pulls out the remnants of one, wrapped in its paper still. He shakes off a paper clip from one hand, while pushing the food into his mouth with the thumb of the other.

You pick up the paper clip and put it back in the bag with the others.
Then:

One morning steel and yellow, arrayed in muscular uniformity.

One morning at the edges of things, the last tangled ugly wood, fenced in by roads.

You and the dog investigate. The air still gray and cool though heavy with the promise of summer heat.

These are machines of the biggest sandbox dreams, wheels twice your height and driver’s cabs perched far above. They bear the scars of use, the heavy smears of dirt, the pale streaks of sandstone on their teeth. These are machines that breathe smoke, bleed oil—they are immense and beautiful and you are frightened. Because even you know this means something is about to change.
George

He awoke in sunlight.

He felt it first in the sense of pinpricks on the skin, the awakening of raw nerves. There was nothing but the sun scraping away at him, and then he became aware that against his back was not heat but soil and he lay between the two, sky and earth.

He lay there and knew he was alive. He knew something had gone wrong inside of him. He felt the overwhelming urge to speak and did so. “Hello,” he said. “Hello?”

The sound of his own voice faded some of the urgency he felt. If he could speak and he could hear himself speak he had not lost all of his faculties. He sat up and shook his head. Something felt loose inside of him, wobbly like his skull had expanded around his brain. He stood slowly. He felt weak and overwhelmingly thirsty but okay. He went inside. He got a drink of water. He sat at the table in the dim slant of a gray morning and tried to shake the sense of impending trouble that would not stop throbbing in his chest. It was more than a gut feeling—it nagged, it insisted, and it wanted something from him. He felt different than when he had watched the deer and seen the shadow of a hunter tear across the clearing and through his chest.

George put on a clean shirt and his boots and stumped out the door into the dry forest. The redwoods in the sun took on a new hue of green, the furred trunks ruddy glowing. The decaying trees beneath them slumped into new shapes of fern and mushroom. Deep in the trees the light came through with only a piece of itself and he walked beneath a canopy that blocked out the skies high over his head. The ferns hung heavy with their own green. Clusters of huckleberries gleamed with bright red berry eyes.

He had begun the Project here nearly twenty years ago, when Penny had left for good.
I don’t want to die here, she’d said, and he’d offered to go with her. She shook her head no. And that was it—she’d driven away. So he’d let her go and he went into the woods and he sat against the stump that was the beginning of the Project and looked around at the sink it had been born in, the long ago hollow of an enormous tree since fallen and decayed and replenished. He’d felt himself sink into the wood, a heavy pressure in his chest like a hand pushing down on him, inexorable and inhuman. No not like a hand, but a sound. A low heavy constant burn of noise, deeper than anything he could here. Before he left he had the idea. Or the idea had him.

He started with the junk that his home had accumulated before and since he’d lived there. The person who had rented the place before George bought it had amassed piles of junk, including the rusted body of a Chevy that had been since claimed by sticky blackberry brambles. He took the car apart—waging war the entire time with stubborn brainless thorns—and took some of the other junk too and carried it into the woods and started the Project. He could see it exactly in his mind’s eye but what exactly he saw was kept changing. A few times he dismantled years of work because he knew it was going in the wrong direction.

Sometimes he found things on the sidewalks—bottle caps, soda cans, broken watches. Once he found an entire kitchen table set by the side of a lonely dirt road and he used three chairs and half the table.

He didn’t know why this Project felt so necessary to him but it felt like breathing. All he knew was somewhere along the line he had failed, and failed so completely he couldn’t even understand his own redemption.
In 1944 he had been at war. Except he was pretty sure he had ended up there by accident. Maybe he had imagined it. His memories were distant and felt like another life lived. He had only been there for a few months, some green rookie, and then came the end of the war and he’d done nothing but flounder around in French mud and barbed wire and die a hundred times over through the men to the left and the right of him that had no more reason to die than he did. That had been a war of heroes and had killed his belief in them. Heroes were just people who happened to get something done when it was needed and the odds were against them. Heroes were just people so all people could be heroes and there was nothing remarkable about it except they were successful where so many others had failed. And lucky. He believed in luck and believed he had none. Luck neither bad nor good but the comfortable indifference of fate. He’d been left alone to live and die and nothing had swayed that until the Project which was something else. Something almost an accident.

Standing in the murky light he leaned against the Project, resting his forehead against its rusting side, and allowed himself to be so stupidly and humanly grateful.

Home again, he washed plates. He had three and none of them matched. They were from the Goodwill and three separate years. He washed blue glass bowls and smoky glass cups. The warm water turned his skin raw and sank into the creases of his hands. The suds smelled like lemon, the harsh perfumed lemon all cleaners shared but was not duplicated by any fruit. Still it made him think of summer in the same way that the new heat made him think of summer but did not seem real. The heat that had settled over everything did not belong among these trees. These trees were green and craved water and in the absence of it shriveled dustily. The radio said the whole country felt this heat. He wished the deserts
would return into themselves and shrink rather than expand but they kept growing and people kept growing into them.

He’d driven through the southwest only once in recent memory and that had been fifteen years ago. Still he remembered the way the dust breathed itself upwards into the air, the way identical beige and white developments with cheap tile roofs horseshoed themselves out into land where people had no business living, where water was piped in from hundreds of miles away and shade was manufactured. Yet even here where living felt right and wanted there was something withering out of it.

The world was ending under all this pressure and the only thing he could do was slip into the cracks of it, waiting for them to close over his head.

He looked out the window over the sink and wondered when the rain would come again. It had been too long. The phone rang and he answered but it was a wrong number, some sour, weary young voice asking about a bird. No one called him anymore unless it was business and he had very little business with anyone.

There were sparrows on the weedy grass behind the house darting from stem to stem and he watched them for a while. He found something comforting in the urgency of sparrows.
22. Now That We’re All Gone, Alone

All the next day I wandered. I didn’t have much cash—what I had saved from working at the library during the school year had dwindled and now I had to begin to think about how much was left, what I was going to do next and where I was going to get more. This understanding hovered at the edge of my mind but I let it flap and whimper and concentrated instead on reading contact information on telephone pole flyers, or business cards tacked to cork boards. I was convinced I would somehow find him this way, that this was the way these things worked. The world is not that big and the people in it are not that small. I read name tags in grocery stores and lists of contributors on the backs of brochures.

Working in the stacks at a school library you see some strange things. Sometimes you smell stuff you wish you hadn’t. I used to find people making out and sliding hands under clothes in dark corners below the surface, back among dusty old law tomes. I found people hunched over piles of books in cubbyholes tucked out of sight who looked like they’d been living there for years. I found people sleeping under tables and muttering pages of books out loud to themselves. I found a woman practicing a jazz dance routine in utter silence and a man painting a picture of a long dark library aisle with a hooded figure walking out of it. Once I found a bat, disoriented and flopping between shelves. It landed against the thick spines of books and clung to them with all four claws. Once I found a dead pigeon resting on a shelf. I don’t know how long it had been there but it couldn’t have been that long because it had not rotted yet. I got someone more qualified to deal with health hazards to dispose of it.

I hate birds.
Ukiah was a town that left me stranded. Strung along the 101 like so many other towns, I didn’t know what to make of it as a place where people stayed. I spent a day wandering and that hurt—it hurt worse than staying with Ruby and Jagger. I wondered how they were doing. I wondered if they were still together. I wondered if it mattered.

The vertigo of homelessness dragged at me. All the places I passed seemed indifferent to me.

I sat on a bench at the edge of a park. I watched dry sycamore leaves scuttle across the sidewalk. I lifted my left foot and crushed one like a papery spider. The heat was intense—even for August. Even in the shade I felt the sun biting on my neck, bending itself around buildings, flattening itself to earth. Maybe we were falling into the sun. Maybe that’s what the problem was. So: what do you grab when the whole world’s falling with you?

There was a pet shop across the street and there were puppies in one window and birds in the other. I sat there watching the puppies playing for a while—I couldn’t tell what breed they were, only that they were tan and fluffy—until it occurred to me that if this was all about a bird in the first place, maybe whoever worked at the pet shop would know something.

The door dinged when I opened it—a bell hung from a cord—and I immediately smelled sawdust and animals. The odor had gelled in the air, the way all banks smell the same, and all bookstores. A middle aged woman stood behind the counter staring intently at the wall. Every few seconds she lifted a water bottle in one meaty hand and tore at the plastic sports top with her teeth.

“Hello?” I said, and she blinked.

“Hi,” she said. “Looking for something.”
“Just looking,” I said, sheepish. Should I ask her if she had Georges in stock?

“She suit yourself,” she said, easing around the counter. I tried not to stare—she was way over six feet, and broad, and she carried an awareness of person around with her was more vast than anything I had ever encountered. “But if you need some suggestions,” she shrugged. “Obviously.”

I smiled weakly and looked at some fish in the array of tanks along the wall. Most of them were maybe the size of my thumb at most. I liked the ones with the oversized, wavy tails, their unapologetic vanity. I watched one orange and white one swimming along, then stop. It slowly rotated, drifting up toward the top of the tank. It bobbed at the surface, belly up.

Déjà vu. “Uh,” I said. “I think one of your fish just died.”

At the window a child cupped his squashed face, grinning indistinctly. His mother pulled him away.

Which one are you? I thought, Burn or Dodge?

“Damn it three ways to hell,” she said. “Not again.” She bagged the fish in a series of practiced movements, scooping it out of the water and depositing it in a plastic bag. “Better take that one to the vet again,” she said. “Though what he knows about fish I would pay good money to see.”

“Have your fish been dying a lot?”

“Dropping like flies. Want one? Half off. I can’t guarantee it’s not defective though. I’m tempted to replace the whole batch. Or stop selling fish all together.” She spread her arms out, the dead fish bouncing from one fist. “Fish, Cheap. Tank Free With Purchase. How does that sound?”
“Fine, I guess.”

She rolled her eyes at me, big watery blue ones. Her black eyeliner caked at the corners. “You guess.”

“Do you have any canaries?”

She pointed without looking at me or where she was pointing. “There by the door.”

The fish in the bag started wriggling. “Well,” she said softly, holding the bag up to her eye so light glinted through it and glimmered on her face the way the reflections of pools do. “That’s a new one.”

I went to look at the canaries. There were two of them, both bright yellow. They looked pretty much the same as D.G. and I wondered if I stuck him in there whether I’d even be able to tell him apart. Probably by his sour attitude and clear dislike for me.

“Both females,” the woman called out, somewhere from the recesses of the store. She came back out without the fish. “They don’t sing so nobody wants them.”

“What happened to gender equality?”

“Eh,” she said. “I think it’s a matter of evolutionary practicality.”

“Don’t people breed canaries?”

She gave me a funny look. “Yeah.”

“So maybe it’s what people wanted.”

She snorted. “You can’t breed something in that’s not already there.”

I watched the canaries for a while. The parakeets next to them were more dynamic, tracing broad angular shapes within the confined space of their cages.

“You interested in birds?” she said.
“Sort of,” I said. “I have to go.” My heart was doing a funny choking thing in my throat.

“If you have questions.” She took a business card off its rack on the counter and handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I said. I was almost at the door when I paused.

“Do you know anyone named George?”

“George?” she repeated. “What kind of question is that?”

“Never mind,” I said.

I kept moving. I thought if I found him by the end of that day, all my confused and muddled efforts would justify themselves. But the sun started sinking and there I was, sitting on the steps in front of the public library, with still no idea how to find a man named George. Cartoonish clouds skidded overhead. The wind was warm off the mountains, carrying with it the smell of pine and fern and cedar. A thick, wooded smell. The ghosts of trees crowded around me, leaning over my shoulders as though wondering what I held in my empty hands, and still already knowing and not wondering at all.

That was the strange thing about this town. Carved out of the woods I still felt the woods here, a separate ghost. Waiting to take this whole place back.

On my way back to the hotel room I called Clary. I missed her: my oldest friend. Yet I had nothing to say to her.

“So how are things going with that man—Max?” I asked her.

“I gave him the flowers, didn’t I?”

“Sorry. I got the impression this was some sort of ongoing project of yours.”
“Call me back when you’ve gotten the bug out of your ass.”

She hung up. Shaken, I called Ruby. She took longer to answer.

“You still in the city?” I asked her.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been talking to Jagger.”

“I haven’t been talking to Jagger.”

“Good,” she said, and hung up.

Was I that incapable of holding on to people?

I walked along with my cell phone realizing I had no one left to call, no one who wouldn’t need a moment to remember who I was, or at the very least would be interested in talking to me. I could call my mother but desperately did not want to.

So I got the card out and called the pet store, just to have a number to dial.

“I’m about to close up,” she said. “What is it?”

“I was in your store?” I said.

“Oh, the weird teenager.”

“I’m twenty-two,” I said.

“Good for you. What can I help you with?” She didn’t sound like being helpful but I asked her anyway.

“What can you tell me about canaries?”
The Nine Lives of the Common Canary

1. In the first life there was a cat and a canary. They lived inside of a fable where neither of them had quite noticed the other yet, as there was also a tortoise, a mouse, a rabbit and a fox, and none of them got along together particularly well. But sometimes the cat, sleepily licking between her toes, would look up into the golden slant of the barn rafters and yawn her pink sharp mouth at the yellow fluttering thing up there, the butterfly bird, the hungry yellow thing. At least the cat felt hungry watching him and one day crept among the rafters in the manner of all good cats: slow tigerish patience, soft fur and dense muscle.

“This won’t end well for you,” said the canary.

“I don’t care,” said the cat. “I’m invincible.” She lunged.

“That’s what they all say,” said the canary, darting before her. “But—”

The cat snagged the bird under teeth and paws. “Any last words?”

“My death belongs to you,” gasped the dying bird.

“How poetic,” sneered the cat, and gobbled him up. Even as she did so she felt the storm leaving her bones and sinew, the thunderous resurrection of storied generations dissipating. The bird burst from her mouth. “Nine for nine!” he chirped, wheeling through sunbeams. Blood dripped from yellow feathers and he sank and the cat pounced and the cat got the canary. This is how the nine lives of the cat passed to the canary.

And you wonder why everyone seems to think they found that poor cat smiling.

2. In the second life the canary and the robin had a troubled relationship. They had been childhood friends, though many preferred the more demure and pleasant canary to the robin, who was prone to aggressive blundering, snide remarks, and mawkish fits of self pity.
The robin never quite got over this jealousy and their later relationship was characterized by a banter more than half-serious, as both were privately convinced of the canary’s superiority. The robin strived to be first at everything, moving far from the reach of the canary’s fame, and eventually achieving a certain notoriety. However, in their hometown, he was never quite able to break free of the canary’s spell.

“Fine,” he said to the world at large. “I’ll never go back,” and he didn’t.

And so the canary sang through the longest winter anyone had ever known until the world froze him over.

3. The third life of the canary passed almost without incident. He lived on an island with large dogs. He lived in a cage and fluttered between bars. He shared food with his mate who loved him in silence and both of them turned yellow with age.

The green feathers dripped from his body.

4. In the fourth life the canary went into the mines. Wild scientists with white hair and lethal gases coursing their bloodstreams said bring them down, bring them down. All sought only to do good. The canary went with a miner named Michael and lived in a cage in the vibrating belly of the earth. Dragons lived down there, and the breath of those dragons was fire and death. On the skin of the earth life rumbled and roared and lights burned holy through the night.

Down in the rough-hewn caves Michael carved away at the darkness and sweated trails through the dust shuddering down upon him, and the canary watched and waited and sang and fluttered until the breath of the dragon seized his brain in a white hot grip and stole
his breath from him. Michael carried him swiftly, this small body in a rough hewn hand, up swiftly out of the earth into the sunlight and stood there gulping in oxygen and thinking the words thank you to the God that had made them both.

5. In the fifth life the canary was a fighter, in defiance of all ludicrousness. The canary wanted blood and learned to fight to the death for the simplest things, for food, for a mate, for a place to sleep, for life, for water to drink, for water to bathe in, for light, for a place to rest, for a bed, for a king-sized mattress, for sectional sofa, for a plasma TV paid off in installments, for the complete collection of Springsteen albums, for a truck that took the bit in its teeth, for all-leather interiors, for electric toothbrushes, for gym memberships, for vacations in Cancun.

The canary fought for it all and died for it all, twisted and broken in a net woven from blood.

6. In the sixth life the canary went to prison. They busted him in New Jersey and took him to court and told him to sing and so he sang until his throat went raw and his voice turned ugly. He never could look anyone in the eye after that. When they finally set him free he flew straight up into sky.

He did not know what to do with freedom and so taught himself to disappear.

7. In the seventh life the canary went to the doctor. The doctor peered inside his brain and watched the birth of neurons, the genesis of small worlds connecting one thought to the next, connecting a long series of thoughts and the world was made up of a long series of
thoughts and the doctor watched universes bloom between his scalpel and the slick round acorn of brain. The doctor fell into memories not the canary’s and not his own but something deeper and common to all species.

“Now,” said the doctor, stepping away. “Open your mouth and sing.”

“Do I have to?” said the canary, stapled to the operating table.

“Please,” said the doctor, firmly. “In the name of Science.”

So the canary sang and the doctor watched the universes of song expand and contract like jellyfish, a sea full of them, a dark sea full of them with no surface and no bottom.

8. In the eighth life the canary was on a ship. The lookout spotted land and the canary, who was not the keenest of sight but perhaps the most experienced at articulating shapes out of blur, asked to look through a telescope at the distant shore. “What do you see?” said the other sailors, crowding around. “An island? Is it inhabited? Is it lush? Will we find food there? Fresh water? Will we find the things we need to repair our leaking ship? Will we have to press on or can we rest here at last?”

The canary peered through the telescope and at length said: “It is land, and green, and there seem to be great cities upon its crests.”

The crew rejoiced but the canary continued to gaze. “Actually,” the canary said, “Those are not cities but gray stones on empty peaks, and I see no signs of human life.”

The crew stilled at this, but then one said, “More for us, then!” and they laughed, showing the stumps of sore teeth.

“Actually,” the canary said, “There seem to be no trees, nor animal life, and the only green upon that shore is grass.”
“Well,” one said with a shrug, “Where there’s grass, there’s fresh water, and if we have water…?” and they slapped his back with scarred hands worn from hunger.

“Actually,” said the canary, “There is no grass, nor water, only great dunes of sand that hiss and sway in the wind like living plants.”

The crew looked at each other with bloodshot eyes and a long time passed before one spoke in a grim voice.

“But on the other side? If we cross those dunes, perhaps we’ll find a greener land.”

The rest of the crew nodded, their joints creaking like the tarry fittings of the ship.

“Actually,” said the canary, “That is no desert shore but a desert isle, barren from end to end and no wider than a finger.”

And the silence stretched out so long it seemed years, and each sailor felt his tender heart beating in the space of his fist and faltering.

“At least,” said one at last. “At least it is something solid to stand on for a moment.”

And each heart beat into the next moment.

“Actually,” said the canary, “That is not land, it’s a cloud, and we will never find land again, not so long as we live.”

“We have no food left,” they said. “We have no fresh water. How can you bring this news to us. If you will not bring us to food we will be forced to eat you.”

The canary sighed. “My death belongs to you,” he warned them, and burst for the skies. They cursed him and caught him and killed him and ate him.
9. In the ninth life, I was a canary. I lived each one of the canary’s lives through and each time I wanted to say: I’m not a canary. Leave me be. But each time I died and eventually, I expect, I will have to die again.
George

Whatever was happening in the woods disturbed him. Those were public lands and as such, he thought, people should not be allowed on them. For the people, not for the people, he thought to himself, laughing aloud in the silence of his home. He felt the woods retreat from him as something inhabited by foreigners and no longer part of him. There was ruin out there and it could not find the Project. It was the last great thing.

Give him loggers. Give him developers. This quiet theft he could not stand.

That night he went out to the Project and sat in front of it with his ax and waited and watched and waited and slept and slept and dreamed of fire and slept and woke to the muted purr of an owl too close overhead and slept and dreamed and dreamed and slept until morning crept over him.

He smelled smoke, the distant traces of it, and felt some awful understanding settling into him. They were coming for him and the Project at last and they didn’t even know what they sought. He let the ax fall to the ground and walked back to his house and filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove. His body ached and his teeth chattered—his skin felt like the slippery hide of some other creature, one more accustomed to water than earth.

What was he supposed to do? He walked back into the woods to meet them.

“Hey,” said the first one. “What’s up. Man.”

They watched him approach as he moved into the camp. Some ignored him.

“How many of you are there?” he asked the first one.

“What are you, a cop?” the guy yawned. He had tattoos all the way up his neck like foreign insects were strangling him. “Come the fuck on.”
George counted twelve makeshift huts and an equal number of tents and at least twenty people within eyesight. The tattooed man gazed at him with eyes friendly and knowing and malevolent at once, eyes that had seen hard roads but not yet walked them to the end. These young people—some of them were not so young but they moved with the assurance of the young—drifted between dwellings like cottonwood seeds, purposeless but yet representative of some bleak joy.

“You shouldn’t be here,” George said. His hands were limp in the pockets of his jeans like two sleeping young animals. If this was the world then he had no place here. There was no air for him to breathe here, no sustenance—and no reason except he was old, except he believed certain things, except he and the man in front of him had come from the same caveman ancestors, the same secret men of the world painting the shapes of animals on cold walls of stone in the darkness, torchlight writhing the pictures to life on the walls in front of them and inside of them on some bloody, joyful level, but that had diverged now between them, that had gone away, and the man who sat before him was a stranger. The man who sat before him eating a sandwich wrapped in newspaper was a man on the distant shore of a river under a fathomless sky and they could see each other only as shadows.

The man laughed. “Dude, I’m sorry. But I think it’s the other way around.”
You and the Tractors

You go to the tractors at night. Some of them are locked and you cannot get inside but you climb on them anyway. The stars burn hot and bright over you because there is no moon tonight. They drip like candle wax onto the dimly glowing Earth.

You know how to find the Big Dipper. It’s one of the first things you ever learned. You find the Big Dipper and then the North Star.

“Hello,” you whisper. “Hello, hello.”

You climb up onto the seat of one tractor with no cab to be locked and pull on the levers. They move very little in your hands, a reluctant bend of some weaker joint. There is no answer from deep within the belly of the beast.

You climb into the cupped maw of the yellow tractor, fitting your hands between teeth. The yellow paint is scratched and streaked with dirt and stone. You cradle into the side of it and point one of your six-shooters at the stars, which are all you can see.


You sleep with your coonskin cap pulled low over your eyes like the real cowboys.

At some point the dog finds his way in with you. His side is warm and scratchy with dirt. You feel the curl of his spine beneath his hair, then reach back to feel yours, the knobby bumps between your shoulders.

“Look,” you say. “We’ve both got skeletons.”

The dog’s drooping lip quivers. He kicks his front legs. A whine escapes his tongue without him ever opening his eyes.
23. Into the Woods

I had a dream about Jagger. He was sitting in the crook of a tree. “Hey,” he kept saying. “Hey, give me a hand, yo. Give me a hand.” He wasn’t talking like himself. For some reason I was trying to ignore him. It seemed important and also satisfying. “Hey,” He said. “Yo, come on. Give me a hand.” So I went over and gave him a hand and pulled him loose from the grip of the tree. He came away with a popping sound, like a magnet from a fridge.

“Thanks,” he said, and slung his arm around my shoulders and suddenly I knew we were going to have sex and then I woke up tangled in the sheets feeling raw. I’m pretty sure at my core I’m evil. My only saving grace is I can’t help it.

The phone was ringing near my ear. I groped for my cell phone and found the hotel phone instead, which cut off as I lifted it to my ear and grunted something like a greeting. Thin light seeped in through the window. The red letters on the digital clock read 5:35.

“Listen,” said the voice on the phone. “Listen. I have an offer I think you’re really going to love to hear.”

The night before I went to a bar—I could not bear another night in the hotel room with only a bird to talk to—and listened to a guy playing a guitar. We were two of the only people in there. He couldn’t sing very well and his guitar was out of tune but he meant it, he meant it so hard he curled his thin body around the guitar and it almost seemed like he was enclosed in a room unto himself, all the cracked parts of him windows. I wanted to apologize to him for seeing it.

I sipped my beer to make it last. Nobody talked to me and I didn’t talk to anybody until a greasy-haired man sat next to me and offered me a business card. I didn’t know whether he was hitting on me or just friendly and when I realized it was neither I was afraid
to feel disappointed. “I need salespeople,” he said. “You look like you could really drive a
product.”

“Vacuum cleaners?”

“Every household needs one. You don’t know how dirty your floors are until you try
one of these puppies.” His hair falsely black and because of the gel I could see through it to
his scalp.

“I just know how to use them.”

“Do you?” He sighed and got up. “That’s something. Let me know if you change
your mind.”

He winked at me and I felt muddy. I was done with other people’s solutions. I
wanted nothing to do with them. Yet I couldn’t think of any of my own.

Now it was morning again and “Listen,” said the voice on the phone. “I have an offer
I think you’re really going to love to hear. We’ve got this brand-new treatment, about to hit
stores, but we want to give our loyal customers the chance to try it first for simply $9.95 a
bottle. Let me tell you,” and her voice deepened, turned complicit. “I swear by this stuff
personally. It’s so easy to take, too. Washes right down.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Oh, honey,” she said, laughing. “That’s totally not the point.”

I turned off my phone and sat on the edge of the bed. The morning closed in on me.

D.G. started shrilling in the corner, chasing chords up and down.

“Shh,” I said. “There aren’t supposed to be any birds in here.” But I didn’t move, and
he kept singing, and nobody came to the door.

“Alright,” I said at last. Dust hung in the air. “Let’s go for a drive.”
M-

Have you ever climbed to the top of the tower just to climb it? There’s a whole other world above the city. It’s quieter, for one thing. The streets echo. There’s more space. I walked through the white dome of Sacré-Coeur like a ghost and startled a couple with my silence. I laughed and heard my laughter come back to me. They gave me a dirty look.

I climbed to the top of Notre Dame along with a long line of tourists. Usually I would avoid such a trap but now that I am living here I wanted to see what the Seine looked like from above. I wanted to look out over Paris from the center of Paris.

The stone at the top of Notre Dame is gray and glacial carved into the thinnest of spires. In the rain you feel the stone all around you. This city is so much stone. Its skeleton is its being and the people and their multitudinous cultures only so much skin stretched across it.

Gargoyles lean from the walls. Their eyes are gleeful. Long tongues unfurl from their mouths.

Up here is where the city keeps all its bad dreams.

-A
Memory #3

My grandfather explained this to me:

The wood, he said, is the most important part. The finest wood for the finest music.

First they go into the hardwood forests and the lumber expert chooses the best trees. Old growth, slow growth. He looks for resonance, for the potential of resonance. You might even say the trees speak to him, if you go in for that New Age baloney. So he harvests the trees and takes them to the warehouse where the piano man comes from Steinway or Bosendorfer and says, *That one. And that one.* So they cut it up into boards. Then they wait—five years, even—while the boards dry and season. The boards that season well are kept—so much still rejected—and given to the woodworker who shapes and joins and tightens them into the sound board for the piano. Even then it is the story of pressure, of minute adjustments so the instrument sings, so it has life. There are a hundred hollow ghosts inside that piano, a thousand trees left rooted in dark German soil. There are a million seeds lodged between roots and under the humus of forests millennia old. The forest rings along the sinews stretched out along the board from the thin steel wire on down to the thick ribbed copper, the low notes, the primal hum. Muffled felts dampen the roar and melody emerges. That’s the part that’s yours, almost.

(Choose a tree.

Choose a tree and I’ll chop it down.)
The car broke down around another tree-lined bend and I pulled into a disused dirt track off the road which involved crushing some dogwood and clover and ending in a tilt and I slammed my hand sideways against the door until I hit too hard and my hand throbbed. I tried the keys a couple more times—the engine heaved but wouldn’t turn. I popped the hood and got out and looked at it but it looked like an engine to me. I had no idea what was wrong.

“You know where we are?” I asked D.G., and as usual the bird did not respond.

I thought about calling a tow truck but the reception indicator on my phone trembled on the verge of uselessness. I turned it off. It was early afternoon and there was no one around and the day hung sleepy around me. The pine trees that had swished past me before now seemed heavy and dense. On the trunk of the nearest I saw a long trail of ants moving like a river through the grooved surface of it. I thought I smelled water but I wasn’t sure what fresh water smelled like.

I’d seen a driveway a short way back. So I got D.G. and his cage out of the car and started to walk. Birds sang around us but D.G. stared around on his unjointed neck. “You’re a broken bird,” I told him. “You only sing when you want to.”

I liked the smell of pine, the softer scent of redwood. They were all around us, these trees, like some barrier to undisclosed cities. The way home lots were cut out of forests disturbed me. You’d come across some sudden clearing, some broad rectangle devoid of trees, and new houses crouching in the mud, bare-framed and redolent of a seasonal ski slope, of houses that stand empty seven months out of the year. The wilderness thinned abruptly into the illusion of wilderness and you’d realize the magnitude of space was only that, an illusion. But here the trees were thick, uninterrupted.
The distance between me and the house I’d seen was greater than I expected. It was maybe ten minutes before I saw the clearing and the cabin some distance back from the road. An old man worked in the garden beside it. The white paint on the house was peeling but it was picturesque in the way poverty is picturesque if you get the right glow on it. The garden was very green, which is all I know about how gardens are supposed to be. I walked down the driveway.

The old man didn’t seem startled by me at all. “Not another one,” he said, straightening as I approached. He wore leather gardening gloves but I saw the angry red smile of a recent cut on his age-spotted arm. “Your car break down too?”

“That’s been happening a lot?”

“Fifth time this week. There’s something about this place. I’ve always known it.” He glared at me, thin-lipped.

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“You’re one of those, aren’t you?” He pointed at D.G.—I was wondering if he’d even noticed him. “That your god, in that cage? You going to burn something, worship him?”

“No,” I said, “Sorry to bother you.”

“If you need to use the phone, use the phone,” he said, and cleared his throat. He was short, shorter than me, though that impression was made stronger by the way he hunched. “I don’t mean to be rude,” he added. “You’re welcome to use the phone, as long as it’s to call a tow truck and not some more of those damn hippies.”

“Thanks,” I said, not bothering to try to understand. “You have a nice garden.”

“You think so?” he said, rubbing his gloved hand over his baseball cap. Giants. His hand trembled. “Looks like weeds and snails to me.”
“Well,” I said. “I guess I don’t know much about gardening.” But he didn’t seem to be listening. There was a pleased expression on his weary face.

“My name’s Myna,” I said. “Like the bird.”

“George,” he said, and I said, “I found you.”
I Found You

I said, “I found you,” and the cage dragged heavy on my arm, but I couldn’t say the words that came next: *I think this bird belongs to you.* They crawled back down my throat, heavy and stubborn, and I swallowed them.

Why, I wasn’t sure.
In the Place of Forgotten Things

I come to a house near a dry streambed. The sunflowers around it are eight feet tall and dying, their heavy heads drooping on brown stalks. Leaves point withered to the ground.

I enter. I walk from room to room brushing away dust and cobwebs from murky corners. I call for people whose names I don’t remember. I brush dust from door knobs and window sills. There is nothing in this house but exhalations of other times.

Outside again I gaze at the mountains, glinting high and cold.

In the mountains in this place of forgotten things there are beautiful caverns made of glass—bottles, vases, reading lenses. Glass melted into lumps by heat or polished by sand under the ocean or glinting along the lines of breakage. These caverns glitter, but watch your step.

In the valleys in this place of forgotten things there are treasures we have buried among the roots and grasses. The maps to them, too, have been lost. The dotted lines lead from nowhere and into mist, no X to mark a spot. When night comes, sparks rise like fireflies.
25. Echoes

George’s place smelled like old carpet steeped in stale air freshener. The wood no longer fit together and I could see all the missed places of a paint job finished in light yellow decades ago. The outside was sort of that subdued white color all houses of a certain age and type are, where gray seeps in.

Inside—inside was filled with things. Little machines, little sculptures. There was an owl perched on a shelf made entirely of wire. Three clocks in a row kept time with synchronized pendulums. Boxes made of the cogs of other machines fit together like puzzle pieces. Even the chairs at the table were made of pieces of other furniture: the remnants of other chairs, other tables. The table top itself seemed one of the only whole things in the room—an enormous slab of a redwood trunk, polished to a deep blood-red.

“Here’s the phone,” he said, pointing. I’d forgotten phones could still be attached to walls, and even as I put it to my ear I felt chained to some archaic stream of voices.

When I was young I believed voices existed separately on the telephone. That when you spoke into it your voice left echoing for a long time through the wires my dad pointed out to me. *See, this is how a telephone works.* He was always explaining things I don’t remember asking about. I don’t think he explained them very well because I thought for years my voice had to travel miles and miles to find someone else and come back to me.

George left a dusty phone book at my elbow and went back into the garden. I stood with the phone in my hand and wished this was easier. I’d expected someone with more presence. More like my grandfather. George was someone without much effect on the space around him—like an unusual piece of furniture, perhaps, a part of the house and land he lived in.
Maybe I was being cruel but I didn’t want to give the canary to him anymore. Not if he didn’t care.

I kept thinking about Dad. I hadn’t heard from Mom in a few days.

Then, I felt like I had little choice in the matter.

“What do you think, D.G.?” I said to the bird. “You belong here?”

He rustled in his cage.

When I came outside I found the old man standing in his garden, trowel in hand.

“Hey,” I said. “Thanks for letting me use your phone.”

He didn’t respond. His eyes were glazed and distant as he faced into the woods. He reminded me of a shabby piece of clothing by the side of the highway, fallen from a car. If he was I would have picked him up and carried him inside and left him on a counter for someone else to deal with. But he was alive, still alive, and there are other ways for dealing with people.

“Hey,” I said, all careful soft, like he was a bird too and frightened. “Are you okay?”

He did not move or say anything. He blinked erratically. His eyes held water.

“Do you want me to call someone?”

“No.” He said clearly, rounding out the o. “I’m okay,”

“Maybe you should come inside,” I said.

He walked slowly like a child does when each limb still feels separate. I was afraid to help him but I kept close. I saw his age-spotted scalp between each thread of his hair. I saw the sag of his skin away from the sockets of his eyes. The clothes he wore fit him better than
his own skin. I felt sorry for him because he was old. I had never felt sorry for anyone just for being old before.

“Maybe you should come inside,” I said. “Maybe you should have a glass of water and lie down for awhile.”

He went inside and shut the door.

“Maybe I should go,” I said to nobody. I stood there a long while breathing warm green air off the garden. But I turned around and went back up the stairs of the porch and through the unlocked screen door too. The old man, George, sat at the table with a glass of water between his hands.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “If you need my help I can stay.”

He looked down at his hands, opened them, closed them again around the glass. I thought of Pops with his pocket watch, sitting in the purple chair in the living room. Opening it, closing it. Opening it.

“I’m okay,” said George again. So much distance between him and me. The light shone in his white hair.

I ran my finger though the dust on the bookshelf next to me. “I think,” I said. “You’re not well. A doctor would help you.”

“No,” he said. Some energy returned to him. “I can’t go. I can’t leave it.”

“Leave what?”

He turned to look at me. “You’re one of them, aren’t you, one of their spies?”

“I am not a spy,” I said. “Who would I be spying for?”
“All of them,” he said, and pointed at the front door—out toward the woods into nothing.
Why Did I Feel He Was Right?

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll go.”

“Be safe,” he said.

“I have a car,” I said. “I have thirty dollars in cash. I have a cell phone. I have the ability to clean up after myself. I have a map of California. I have a Snickers bar and a box of Wheat Thins. I have a recurring problem with animals. I have a note for you from a woman who wants to know why you never went looking for her.”

“Penny?” he said, voice garbled.

“Some lady I met in the city.”

I put the envelope on the table and left. Waiting to cross the highway I watched a car drive by, a battered Geo. Someone stuck their arm out of the window and I heard laughter. They were my age, probably. I waited for their car to die as mine had died but they kept going, roaring around the bend.

I kept walking.
George

He opened the note. He saw his hands were shaking though they felt steady at the ends of his arms. He watched them open the note, a folded piece of legal paper.

Someone had scrawled across it in thick-leaded pencil: *Why Did You Never Come Looking For Me?*

It wasn’t Penny, the woman who had left him to die elsewhere. The handwriting, the style was all wrong. Really he hadn’t expected it to be Penny. But somehow the words hurt anyway. They were meant to hurt someone, maybe anyone. Some dusty, lonely version of Penny could have written that letter, could have given that letter to the young woman as she in turn had given it to him. Perhaps because he seemed lonely too. But who was he to untangle the motivations of others?

He folded the note carefully and put it inside his desk drawer. The bird on the table starting singing.
You and the Old Man

You’ve found something real good this time. A sweet slice right off a dream pie. It’s a collection of birds. All bagged up by a trashcan in the alley behind the grocery store. You wouldn’t have known what they were except for the sharp edge of a blue plastic wing, which has punctured and thrust through the Hefty bag.

You take them back and line them up along the edge of the cave. They will be your guards. Some of them were real once. Those are the ones that look worst off.

“What are you doing?” says the old man. His funny smell is more pronounced now. He still doesn’t want to leave your cave. “What’s all this?”

“They’re birds,” you tell him. “Birds are watchful.” You learned all about this in school. When a hawk circles over the ground he’s looking for the tiniest of motions. And all the little birds have to watch for him back.

“I don’t know about this,” he says. He starts stuttering like he does when he’s agitated. “I d-d-don’t know a-b-bout this.”

“It’s good,” you say, looking at him askance. He does not look so well, nor does he seem to be getting any better. You wish he would leave and leave you alone but you also feel sorry for him. “The birds will help.”

Some of them have funny smells too, but that doesn’t really matter.

Each one of the birds has a story.

“You were a very bad man,” you tell one. “You killed lots of people.” You set it aside, entangling the feet in twigs to keep it upright.

“You were a princess,” you tell another one. It’s a pretty shade of blue but it’s missing one eye. You balance it against the trunk of a tree.
“You were a fisherman. You were the best one in your whole town.”

“You liked to ride bicycles, like me.”

“You were a cowboy. You had two guns, like this. *Pow pow!*”

“You were good at keeping secrets.”

“You were collected butterflies. You knew the names of every single one in the world…”

When you’re done they are arrayed over your secret place, protecting everything you have found.
26. Reasons to Stay

I thought about walking until I got reception then calling a taxi because it was cheaper than calling a tow truck. I couldn’t afford taking the car someplace to get it fixed right now anyway. Well, I mean, I could. But what was the point? Leaving all that money behind felt like I was giving up part of myself as well. I got poorer and poorer and my spirit became impoverished too. Maybe I had been doing all of it wrong.

But first I went back and I tried the car and it started fine. Go figure.

My phone rang as I re-entered the hotel room.

“Myna,” my mother said. “You come home now.”

Her voice had the ring of a petulant child. Come home now. But there was something darker in it, and I knew before I said a word I didn’t want to talk to her.

“Your dad’s getting worse,” she said.

“What do you mean, worse?”

“The same, but more so.”

I felt my mother had become a teenager in my absence. “Okay,” I said. “What does that mean.”

“They discharged him from the hospital because they thought a home environment would help him and he has a nurse to take care of him here but it’s not helping. He’s stopped eating altogether. He was barely eating and then he stopped and we found him unconscious on the landing.”

“I’ll be home tomorrow,” I said. “Promise.”

I meant it at the time. But I think deep down I still knew I was lying.
“Good,” Mom said. “I’m glad.” She hung up.

“You unthankful bitch,” a woman said, very clearly into my ear, and then nothing. She was gone.

“Hello?” I tried a silence later. I heard something other than a voice or machine move in the depths of the static. The thought of my voice racing down long, thin wires into deserts and oceans gave me vertigo. If I let it go too far my voice would not come back. I hung up quickly.

Normally I could wake up and think about the dreams I’d had as distantly as movies. However lately I could not shake them off. I dreamed about birds a lot. I dreamed mostly about D.G. A yellow blur flitting at the edge of my vision. I’d follow him out of dreams and into others, reaching along a thin line of something spun out of myself, a thin insistent line I couldn’t see.

But that night I dreamed about Clary—dreaming before I knew I was asleep. At least, I think it was Clary. She wore one of those soft and vaguely shapeless cotton dresses you can get on sale at discount stores, something she would never normally wear. She wore a big pink gardening hat, the floppy kind made of straw, and the sun shining through it cast on her face the flush of something not a right shade of pink, a shade too bright and haunted.

She stood in a field of sunflowers taller than her and all bent the same way, their giant drooping blossoms like the bowed heads of an indifferent crowd.

Max was there with her, his shirt sweaty and rumpled, looking like he’d had the wrong kind of dream.
“Have you ever wondered,” she said, running her hand down his back. The dark stains of sweat on his shirt looked like wings. “Why sunflowers get so tall?”

“I guess they have to be?” he said after a moment. He wiped his dripping forehead with the back of his hand. “To get enough sun?”

“I think it’s the children,” she said, and reached for him but looking at me, her expression still flushed, a hungry and ripening stare, and I felt sick in my dream, I let myself feel sick and swayed with the force of it as she scraped sunflower seeds from his skin, from his hair, from the lobes of his ears, letting them rain down as she drew him into her. She ran her tongue up his neck. I felt my feet sinking into soil.

“She’s dead!” Clary hissed at me.

I woke up thinking Clary, oh Clary, what have you done now.
M- Remember when we used to play dress-up with Mom’s old dancing outfits? I remember how much you loved that blue dress, the one with those ridiculous ruffles. And we’d give you the red lipstick and the mauve blush and the blue eyeshadow and you’d look like a clown?

Yesterday I thought I saw you. That’s not quite right. I did see you, but all the same I knew it wasn’t you. She was a flamenco dancer. I saw her through a window at night. The light made her look especially gaudy, wearing the layers of someone else’s clownish idea of beauty. She looked really nothing like you but I could see you in that dress with the hem tangled around your feet, scowling because you could not see yourself fully in the bureau mirror. The sharpness of that image still astonishes me—you standing on the stool, straining up on your toes, hair falling in your face.

You never were a dancer, though.

-A
George

He faded in and out of awareness, not certain of the day or even the hour. Suns rose and set, people came and went. Most recently there had been a girl. She felt like someone he should know or like someone he had known once.

He became aware of himself at the kitchen table. Upon the table there was a birdcage and inside the birdcage was a small yellow bird. He regarded the bird and the bird regarded him, cocking its head and turning sideways on its perch.

It seemed to him the girl had been carrying a bird. It had occurred to him to notice that oddity—he had never seen someone carrying a bird around unless the bird was a parrot and the person was in costume, some kind of street performer. The girl had not been performing anything but her own unhappiness. It seemed to him she had not left with the bird she had brought.

So this must be the bird. Why she had left it here he didn’t understand.

In any case he was more concerned about the shadow outside, snuffling around the roots of the house. He was more concerned about what was happening to the woods.

The afternoon grew long, stretching elastic in the yard. It was heavy and hot with still no sign of relief.

The bird let out a brief, sharp trill. He regarded it. There was something in it that tugged. Something magnetic.

He had to protect the Project.
27. Even the Best of Us

It was late morning. I should have already left but I wasn’t ready to go. I walked past people that didn’t notice me. Without the bird I was just a person again. The highway swept people in and out and the lives of people here only brushed mine briefly and they knew it.

My feet took me to the pet shop because she was the person I had spoken to most. It was closed even though her posted hours said she was open every day. I cupped my hands around my eyes and peered into the dark interior. I saw the shapes of carriers, of cages, of bags of food and burbling aquarium tanks lit by dim blue lights.

My phone was in my hand and I called her phone number. Unsure what I wanted to ask her. Maybe: what should I do with a bird I didn’t have anymore. Maybe: did I do the right thing. Maybe I was worried about the old man, and worried about the bird for leaving it with him. Maybe like Jagger I had acted in haste and made a mistake I couldn’t unmake.

The phone rang eight times and went to message.

“Are you looking for more meaning in life?” said the machine. “Do you feel like it isn’t worth it sometimes—that the payoff doesn’t justify the pain? We’ve got something we can sell you that will fix it. You can take it like a pill or rub it in like a cream or talk it out with one of our highly trained professionals. All it takes is one quick ca—” The machine beeped, cutting off the message, and I hung up in that waiting silence.

Across the street a woman walked by with a brown dog at the end of a leash—a short ugly dog that seemed to be dragging its hind leg slightly. She stopped and waved—she was unremarkable looking but her hand was the most elegant I had ever seen.
Hi Burn, I thought. Hi Dodge.

I held my phone in my hand. I felt the need to call someone who knew me, to confirm I was real. I thought about who else I could call. It was a very short list. I didn’t call anyone.

But Clary called me. “I just passed her in the street.”

Instinctively, I looked around. “What are you talking about?” I said.

“Her! His wife! I didn’t think she even left the house!”

It took me a moment to remember. “You’re crazy,” I said.

“I thought you at least would understand.” Each word was a small, dull knife sliding between my ribs.

“Why would I understand?”

“If you don’t get it, never mind. Never mind.”

She hung up. I called her back but all I got is a tinny ring in the distance. No response, no answering machine, only the emptiness. “Hello?” I said between rings.

I hung up, and immediately my phone buzzed with a text message. Then a second.

The first one said, *New Discounts at Your Local Home and Garden Store! Prices Slashed! Make your Home the Envy of your Neighbors!*

The second one said, *When did you turn into such a bitch?*

I kept thinking I ought to call someone about George. I should not have abandoned him. I didn’t want to be involved. He seemed fine. Maybe I should have called.
I’d been staring at the sign *Haircuts $15* for ten minutes before the woman working inside came out to ask me if I was alright.

I think the only reason I went inside was to sit down for awhile.

“You look like someone I know,” I said once I was in the chair. She looked so much like the pet shop woman it was eerie. My hair, slick and wet, hung to my shoulders. In the mirror I looked like an unhappy otter. More tired than I felt.

“I imagine you’ve met my sister,” she said. “Woman has an edge to her, doesn’t she?”

“I guess.” I said. “You really do look similar.” Whether or not we were actually talking about the same woman didn’t seem to matter.

She cut my hair slowly. I watched dark pieces fall and curl on the floor. I realized I had not told her how short I wanted it. I couldn’t bring myself to care.

“We get that a lot,” she said. “We always have.”

“You don’t seem very much like her.”

“Even the best of us,” she said, “come in pieces.”

“I have a sister,” I told her. “When I was nine she decided she wanted to travel the world. So she did.”

“That’s nice,” said the hairdresser, switching on the blow dryer. “Are you and your sister close?”

“No.” I had to raise my voice to be heard above the dryer. “She left. So I did not have to love her anymore.”

She gave me an odd look but said nothing. She finished drying my hair and turned me around in the chair and handed me a mirror. “What do you think?”
I don’t know what I was expecting, but it was not to look the same—the same person with a different haircut. Shorter now around the ears.

“It looks good,” I said, but she wasn’t paying attention to me. I followed her gaze out the front windows, which faced west.

Smoke curled up from the low dark of the mountains, shrouding them in the smudge of charcoal. The sun had turned a pale yellow-brown. “Well,” the hairdresser said. “That’s not good.”

A fire. I ran the whole way back to the hotel, my lungs drawing down oxygen deeper than they had in a long time.
You and the Monsters

One morning the old man is gone. The dog is gone. The air is rumbling: a constant thunder, a quaking in the earth. There is something wrong.
George

Carrying the bird cage he moved through the woods unsure of his bones. They seemed wobbly inside his skin, no longer connected to each other. His skin too, and his heart, his spinal cord, his feet—all felt very far away. The ground was still there though and he used it to feel his way, a solid support when his body was less cooperative.

He passed through a meadow of skunk cabbage, their large, prehistoric leaves spread open to the filtered sunlight.

He loved this place, he knew—loved this last place he had chosen for himself to inhabit. The woods were something bigger than him but allowed him to be small in them without partiality. The soil beneath his feet was spongy and pungent and still in the process of decomposing from bark and needles into dirt. This whole place was tree, and he walked upon tree, navigating fallen limbs, and so it transported him into canopy. The air was heavy and dark with a heat that did not belong to it. His clothes were damp with the wrong kind of sweat.

There was nothing he could do about it.

The cat followed him carrying the bird in the cage, meowing at his heels, her tail snapping back and forth. Distantly aware of her, distantly annoyed, he nudged her away with his foot.

“Quiet now,” he said. “I’m busy.”

He smelled smoke. It itched in the back of his throat. He knew who it was and who had done this and he hated them for invading this quiet space he loved. These trees and the coolness of them had been threatened. His boots were too big for his feet but they found the way with certainty.
28. A Bad Idea

Driving I threaded into trees past the square, simple houses in their square, simple clearings. They hadn’t yet shut down the roads though they were preparing to and it had been an easy thing to slide out of town before they got there, an easy thing. The air was sharp with the smell of smoke and collected in a headache between my brows. I turned on the radio and looked for the strongest station. Country music blared between fits of static and soon the static overtook it, punctuated with bursts of garbled Spanish. I felt the car lurch as I got closer—the growl in the engine. This time I expected it. By the time I rattled into the drive the car was already turning to mush beneath me, the pedals no longer connected to anything important. I rolled as far as gravity would take me. When I lurched to a stop the engine clunked like something large had fallen over inside of it and then the silence closed in.

It was hot. Hotter than it ought to be. At home this wouldn’t bother me but here I felt parched. I thought about water. Normally drinking water felt like a chore to me. I never craved it. But now all I could think about was a tall glass full of clear and shining water. It seemed to me when I was younger I would sometimes drink water so clean and fresh it seemed to be sweetened with something like the taste of watermelon. I remembered the feeling of that water on the back of my tongue even now.

I jogged to the front door, ducking my head as I stepped into the shadow of the low roof. “Hello?”

George didn’t answer so I knocked and waited and when there was still no response I knocked again, opening the door and leaning inside. The emptiness of the cabin seemed weighted—the small things that had fascinated me before looked like trash covered in dust. And the bird was gone. And the cage was gone. And George was gone.
The house had been emptied of all living things except me. Even the shadow that had bubbled jelly-like in the corners was gone. I slammed the door behind me as I left, walking out into the carefully mowed patch of grass between the porch and the garden, kicking through the tufts at the edges where the house sagged into it. The garden sagged too—I’d thought it green yesterday but it seemed moth-eaten and dry. All the lettuce had holes in it and the leaves wilted away from each other among the weeds.

In sixth grade I had to do a science project. Though science was the one subject I loathed I still managed to choose an idea far more difficult than anything anyone else was doing. We had been learning about tides and I wanted to see whether the moon pulled on trees the same. So I planted a sapling in the corner of the yard. I think it was a fruit tree, because that was the only kind Mom would allow. I can’t remember what kind. Not apple. Maybe apricot. Or lemon. Something supposed to grow well in our dry climate. All throughout the project—a long series of months from the beginning of the school year to the end—nothing happened. The tree did not grow, not one inch.

So even though I’d started long before everyone else I stayed up late the night before painting styrofoam balls with the colors of the planets of our solar system so I could explain something about the way heavenly bodies spun around and around and never collided. The teacher game me a B-. Said my write-ups were “disappointingly brief” and my project was not “experimental” enough. She gave me an encouraging note about how much talent I had and ended it with a loopy smiley face, the circle of the head not quite closed.

Looking at George’s garden made that lopsided face bob in my mind like some gaudy fishing lure. When the leaves on that little tree—tangerine, maybe?—had all finally fallen off in the middle of summer, Mom pronounced the tree dead and Dad dug it up and threw it out
with the rest of the trash. I didn’t feel bad about it until I saw him carrying it, his hand wrapped easily around the trunk of the tree like the neck of a swan, my gentle father taking care of things as he did. Something hurt swelled in me. I blamed that poor stunted tree and whatever rot had killed it. But mostly I blamed everyone else for not knowing how much time I had spent measuring it, so I had to stand across the aisle from Danny Bell and watch him preen over the red ribbon for his banal comparison of different brands of paper towels and nobody even asked me any questions about the solar system. They merely smiled and kept walking. This is my whole life. People who smile and keep walking. And all the time I’m standing in a dying garden, surrounded by nothing but heat and trees and spaces that stretch on forever without anything of me in them.

I could see how living here by himself George might come to feel the same. I could see how he would want to leave and find somewhere with no spaces to lose himself in so he could live instead with that longing to have those spaces back again. But his car was still here, that beaten old truck. He had taken D.G. and gone somewhere else. Deeper into those spaces and not away.

I heard the crackling of gravel under wheels, and I hid behind a trellis of some dying plant.

Burn and Dodge parked and got out of the car. “Hello?” Burn called, and walked to the door of George’s house. I crouched low, the smell of wet earth thick in my nose, peering between leaves.

She knocked, and knocked again. “No one here,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Dodge moved around the little house, peering into each window. When he came around to the front again he shook his head.
“Too bad,” he said. “There’s nothing here.”

“Not here,” she said. “We’ll have to come back.”

He touched her on the shoulder, drew her into a hug. “It’s okay,” he said. “I know.”

I waited until they were turning down the road I had pointed out, driving too slowly. Like they were still looking for something. Like they were waiting for me to come running after. I waited until I was sure they were gone. Then I hugged my arms around myself and walked quickly into the woods. The fire made me uneasy, but surely I had time. There was only one path to follow.
Encounters with Burn and Dodge

They look different every time. But here is a list of places I have seen them.

1) In the backyard of my neighbor’s house, peering over a fence.

2) Outside Ruby’s apartment, asking for the time. Then they both smiled but left me alone.

3) In a pet store I saw them on the other side of the window. One saw me, a child, peering through. His mother pulled me away but they both waved and grinned. The child pointed his finger at his own chest.

4) Shoveling fish out of the sea on either side of me, two women stretched tall and thin as knives. They spoke to each other over me. I suspected them of wanting to push me in.

5) In a rainstorm crouched on a fence, crooning the songs of crickets.

6) Walking a dog with a bum leg, a woman I crossed the street to avoid.

7) In the middle of the night on the other side of a wall, entangled in spidery threads, following a bird, I saw them moving in the distance. Both of them were shrunken shadows, dragging their fallen parts behind.

Only one time am I uncertain it was them.

Burn:

The one called Burn eyes himself in the mirror. He pulls down his eyes like a bloodhound, opens them wide—the tracery of veins runs into the pink flesh housing his eyeballs, the dark wide irises. He releases the skin under his eyes—sunken and bruised—to pull the skin around his mouth taut like a frog’s, until his lips burn.
“Maw,” he drawls, rolling his lips across his teeth. “Maw.” He mashes his fingertips into his face like its clay, observes the results.

“Quit that,” says Dodge, from the hallway. “You’re obsessing again.”

“Obsession about art is impossible and necessary,” Burn replies.

“I didn’t mean that literally. Jesus God. Come on. It’s time to go digging for stories again.”


“You know how it works. Come on.”

Dodge:

The one called Dodge sits at a table with Burn. “Do you ever wonder why we do this?”

“Do what?” he says. He’s eating a banana, peeling each side down carefully. He removes the blue and yellow sticker and presses it against Dodge’s forehead with his thumb. She ignores it.


“You can’t miss something you never knew was dead,” he says, so seriously, and then laughs.

She smiles a promise of harm. “I’m sick of being a woman,” she says. “I’m sick of being a man, too.” She spreads her fingers out on the table.
“Okay, what do you want to be next time?” he says. He takes three quick bites of the banana.

“A shadow,” she says. “A shadow inside of a river, beneath a sandstone boulder.” She takes the banana sticker from her forehead and presses it to his arm.

“No rivers,” he says, brushing it off and letting it fall to the floor. “But we could probably manage a culvert, beneath a bridge.”

“Sure,” she says. “What’s the difference.”

A Mantra:

We are Burn and Dodge. We are the grievers. We grieve for everyone including you and the things that you have tried to forget and the things that you forgot to remember. We allow you to maintain the stories that you have learned to tell yourself.

Grief holds the world together. Grief requires the world to fall apart. Grief requires you to fall so others can grieve for you.

It’s an easy thing.
You and the Last Day

The first thing you do is make sure everything is in its place. All your treasures arrayed in fragments of gleam and tarnish and the birds watching over it all. You make sure they are firm on their perches. You make sure they are all watching, plastic birds and feathered birds. You make sure they will keep your treasure safe. A flock of crows screeches overhead, stirred up from nearby trees. You collect your bike and walk it creaking up the hill.

The tractors have begun to work. They scrape back and forth across the soil, turning under the sod and the last of the weeds that covered the ground. You feel the empty spaces in your chest rattling. The dog crouches before one, the big one with the wide low-slung jaw. He dips and barks, his haunches low and tail between his legs. His teeth flash white. You can’t hear him above the roar but you see the wildness in him. The man in the tractor is cursing. He throws something at the dog, some balled-up piece of trash. His tractor bellows.

The old man sits at the edge of the field.

“No,” he says. “Stay away. Stay out.”

The man driving the bulldozer in front of him cuts the engine. “Get out of here, old man,” he says. “You’re trespassing.”

The old man stands up. He is creaky with age. The rags hang on his bones like tatters of the skin of a thousand animals. “I’m not going to move.”

“Goddamnit,” the driver says. He climbs down from the cab. Other men are coming over. One of them is a man with a clipboard and a larger belly and you know he’s the bossman.
You lift your gun and you cock back the trigger and you squint your eyes along the line of it and you whisper the words to yourself. *Bang, bang.*

“What’s the matter,” the bossman says.

“Come on, get going,” the driver says, and he moves to take the old man by the arm. The dog is there snarling, something vicious in him you did not see there before. And you feel vicious too. You feel angry. They are too close to your treasures.

There is shouting now. The old man cowers back. His face is so gaunt you can see the bones beneath his skin, the disease eating away at them. No one is looking at you as you climb into the cab of the large bulldozer, the door left open. You want to do something. You want to save something before it’s lost. But now sitting up in this chair so much higher than anything you have ever sat in before the levers and buttons are incomprehensible to you. You did not realize there was so much space in here. The keys are still in the ignition.

They all look up when the engine roars. You reach out and push a lever—and it takes so much more strength than you thought it would—and the whole machine lets out a grinding groan that reverberates in the air around you. You push all the levers and buttons you can and scramble out the door, out across the front of it and away from them all. The machine shakes and starts moving and you grab the exhaust pipe sticking up out of the engine for balance.

There is more shouting and words that recall the taste of soap. The dog has bitten the arm of the man who drove your bulldozer and he is angry, he is bleeding, and they are on their phones now, they are calling someone to come and take him away and make him better, all of their voices clamoring out into those other places you can no longer reach, to those people that speak back to them across those long distances that only exist inside of voices, and you are running.
“Come on, Dog,” you call to him, your voice high and breaking with fear. You fear they’ll run him over, that they don’t care he’s a dog. “Dog, come here, please.” Your voice is barely audible above the clamor but he comes, darting away from the tractors and the people and trotting toward you.

“Good dog,” you tell him. You hug him around the neck. He smells like dog. “Good dog.”
George

It had become easy now. All of this time the ache of the unfinished Project was because he was missing this one piece, this one very last piece. It fit right into the center, behind the rack of old chair legs like the grate of the fire. Right into the very heart.

The bird fluttered a pulse.

Standing at the base of it he took a step back. Five steps back. The Project was enormous. There wasn’t a word big enough for how big it was. All those words by which people balanced the size of one thing he felt meaningless because size has no meaning without memory. Gargantuan. Titanic. This was the biggest thing he was sure anyone had ever made. Everything in it a piece of him. Everything in it the piece of something right. And that’s what made it seem to breathe—that’s what gave the eyes a gleam like the reflection of some distant Promethean fire.

That and the sadness buried within it.

“Come on,” he said, kicking aside the ax he’d left there. “I’m waiting.”

He’d always felt he carried another place within him. Maybe he was the only one who remembered the way the forest used to be. He was a forgotten man carrying a forgotten idea inside of him.

Maybe he was the only one who remembered Penny. No one else did—whatever mark she had left upon the world was gone or blurred across great distances. Except for the things he kept. The postcards, the photographs, blurry and half-eaten by age.

Also: he was the only one who remembered himself. So maybe it didn’t matter what other people saw in his forest. Maybe it didn’t matter what other people saw at all.
The world would fold itself into the frayed darkness he’d always seen at the edges of it and had seen more sharply in these fading days. He felt that now. Felt the ruins he had helped build were all there was left, nothing new or whole left in this world. Nothing whole but the pieces together. And that was the Project, and the Project was him.

“Come on,” he said, sinking.

He felt so old.

His heart said the things he no longer remembered how to speak with his mouth:

Hail the men and women that had gone before him brave and forgotten and everything they had carried with them.

Hail the stories that were all that could be remembered of names both remembered and lost.

Hail the places they had all been born and died in.

The Project rumbled and roared. It opened its mouth and breathed fire upon him. Here he was the closest to himself and the furthest from himself he’d ever been.

“Keep making your little machines,” Penny said when she left. “There’s so much that is beautiful in the world for you to show people.”

And he wanted to tell her—I make what I do because I have nothing given to me.

He’d watched her go, let her go. Even the wisest of people can break a heart unknowingly, and leave unfinished pieces behind.
He felt tangled in memory, strands of it holding him up and confining him—the forest was consumed by the shadow that had stalked him these late days. He saw it like a bear emerging from night, a shadow that collected shadow unto itself, blurring the trees and the distance between them. It inhabited the Project as he was inhabited by the Project. The other side of memory.

How do you slay a beast like that?

He faced it in the end as he had faced it as a boy, cold in the jaws of the cave. It was not just his story. It was not just his.

He let the shadow crush his heart, and took the shadow with it.

He sagged against a redwood tree, found a space in the buttress of roots to cradle him. The cat kept meowing up at the Project. “Leave it,” he said, but the cat ignored him as the cat always did.

The trees here always felt like something human to him. He closed his eyes. Waves of weariness washed over him. He wasn’t sure what he was waiting but that’s what the quietness in him felt like. Waiting.
You stop.

There is a strange sound rumbling behind you. You are scared. You are scared to look. You remember the monsters, you remember the stories of them. You remember how they came alive.

There is a woman standing on the sidewalk looking at you. She is the sunflower woman. She is standing next to the man she gave the sunflowers to. He is not looking at you; he is looking at the monster behind you and you see it reflected in his eyes. You crouch down and cover your ears. Somewhere near you the dog is growling. Somewhere near you the old man is sobbing. You don’t like the sound of him sobbing and you are trying to block it out but the sound of it keeps sinking in through your hands. The sound of him sobbing hurts. It sounds like something breaking. Behind you the monster is breaking. It rattles and coughs, brought to life by you and put back where it came from by the things you did to it to make it broken. The dog barks and you twist around and look. The machine tips into the drainage ditch with a terrific crash. Black smoke billows up. The other machines, smoothly purring, all seem to be listening and waiting. You and everyone else is waiting and looking too at this machine and its silence that is different than the silence of waiting.

“Bang bang,” you whisper.
29. Into the Woods, and Further

The path through the woods was narrow but well-worn, bare of the ferns and moss and decaying wood that littered the ground around me. I had never been in the redwoods before, not like this. I had seen them before, I had skirted fields of them before, but these trees were older, and the sun did not break so easily between them. Stripes of gold highlighted trunk and earth and green leaves at the edges of flowering dogwood.

The ground was spongy beneath my feet and the sky seemed very far away and there was something subterranean about the way I felt now, about the way I moved, about the unknowingness of my blind progress forward. I jogged between layers of earth and I didn’t feel buried. I felt cradled, I felt unwanted, I felt suspected, I felt acceptance, I felt regret—and all of it was mine. All of it was me. I did not know what the trees could be thinking. I did not know why I felt the trees could be thinking.

Part of me wanted the bird back—the only part that made any sense. I missed that yellow feathery blob that had caused me so much trouble but only because I had allowed him to cause me that trouble. The rest of it was just this jumble in my head or in the vicinity of my head. There was something about guilt and something about fear and something about caring about the old man for no good reason. Something about having no good reasons for anything. There was something about my grandfather having known him and something about how he seemed familiar, connected, in a way I couldn’t place.

I wanted to know why. Why he got to keep the bird and I didn’t. And the woods closed around me, tall and high, filling with smoke. I wondered if this is what the bird felt, inside of his cage. Whether or not those bars were bars of security or entrapment or whether, like me, he didn’t know what to feel.
The girl appeared on the path and he was not surprised to see her. She tripped when she saw him though, catching herself. Her hair—shorter now—hung in her eyes and she pushed it back.

“Where’s D.G.?“ she said.

“Who?” he asked. The part of him that was his body seemed very distant from everything not his body and he had trouble reconciling the two.

“The bird,” she said. “Where’s the bird.”

He pointed and she turned and she saw the Project for the first time. He saw her skin shiver, the way the small hairs on her arms stood on end like the thin green moss that grows on fallen logs, reaching for the rain. Except there was no rain. There had been no rain for a long time. The dust blurred the air and in the sunlight turned to something precious. It smelled like smoke.
30. The Project

It looked like something between a dragon and a dinosaur. Mythical but familiar, some missing link from a half-forgotten story. Something you might dig out of the earth: the bones of it, the unfinished memory of it. These bones were made of oil and grease stains and splintering pieces of wood, and though the sculpture itself was dwarfed by the trees it dwarfed me. It was easily thirty feet high and the head bowed nose to the earth on a reptilian neck and the tail curved around trees and the claws extended to the very ends of paring knives. And everything it was made of was a piece of something else, some of it pieces I couldn’t believe he’d brought here without help, without other machines to help.

And yeah I guess I was shocked this old man was capable of building such a monster. He must have been at it for years. Decades. Next to it he was nothing—frail and falling apart, a broken old rag doll somebody had left for this monster to find. It waited, jaws parted, for the kill. Maybe it had already struck. Maybe the kill and the waiting and the after were the same moment anyway—all contained in the same possibility.

Deep inside the chest of the thing was a familiar cage. Within it fluttered something yellow. How had he gotten it all the way up there? I don’t know why—I almost started crying.

Seven things happened in succession:

1) The old man said, in a sudden, sharp voice—“What do you want, anyway?”—and I didn’t know how to answer him.

2) A crow flew up from the woods to my left, followed by another—quick and very near to me, their wings throbbing like the heartbeats of frightened rabbits. From one of them
I caught the palest of yellow gazes—struck through with the emptiness in the eyes of all birds, something I will never understand.

3) The bird—my bird—let out a rapid series of twills—singing more loudly than I had ever heard him singing before, like it had been torn from his throat, and I could sympathize—that helpless, inevitable struggle the only way you could. And once he started singing he didn’t stop, and his yellow voice filled the woods with the sound of it, a tiny orchestra no one was listening to except me, old man George, and the cat.

4) The tabby cat at the foot of the sculpture meowed, stretched up on its hind legs and began to climb.

5) A man came fleetly through the woods nearby and stopped and looked at us. He was wearing a pink towel around his waist and a leather pouch flapped around his neck.

“Dude,” he said. “You insane?” He kept running. “The road’s this way, right?” he yelled back, but I couldn’t see him anymore. I don’t think he even saw the sculpture. It loomed the way a tree does.

6) A couple of women—petite pixie cuts dyed black and pink and blue, a matching set except for the clothes and disparate proportions—ran past too and barely paused to look at me. “You know there’s a fire, right?” The heavier one said in passing. She sounded bored, but the other one looked nervous. “It was an accident, right?” she said as they moved away. “Shut up,” said the first one.

7) The smell of smoke got stronger. At last it occurred to me: I might actually be in some kind of danger.

“Come on,” I said to the old man. “We should go.”
“Go where?” he said.

“There’s a fire,” I said. “They’re closing down the roads. I came to get you out.” And D.G.

“A fire?” he said. “But these woods never burn.”

“Wrong,” I said. “Everything burns.” I picked up the cat, which hissed but did not struggle, and held it out to him. He took it in his gnarled bluish hands and folded it into his arms. “I’m going to get the bird.”

“No,” he said. “It’s living, it’s alive.” He gripped my arm, drawing himself up into something more fierce and also pathetic.

“I’m getting my bird,” I said, and started to climb. It was harder than it looked. The sculpture was not smooth and polished, not all the same material. And there was nothing holding it together except itself. As I pulled myself up with the handle of an old suitcase, resting my foot on the leg of a coffee table, I heard a groan deep inside the beast, something that reverberated inside of me, some kind of settling.

“You’ll ruin it,” George called. “You have to stop.”

I looked down. The ground looked farther away than it should and weakness seeped into my arms. I do not do well with heights. They turn me all to jelly. I swallowed and kept climbing. My heart was pounding in my ears like a drum so hard I could feel it and barely hear anything except my own labored breathing. I remembered, abruptly, junior high P.E. and the obstacle course. That damned obstacle course. I was always the last one to finish because I could not get past the ropes. I would haul and haul at them while other kids streamed up and down the ropes on either side of me and I could barely get a few feet off the ground. Eventually I would give up and slide down and, face burning, speed through the rest
of it. It wasn’t until the last month of the last year I realized how you could use your feet, how much easier that made it. I felt like an utter fool. Most of my life I’ve felt like a fool.

I think a part of me is still a third of the way up that rope, gripping it for dear life while the fibers burn and blister my palms, my clenched knees, trying not to lose the ground I have attained, while the rest of the world stares at me, judging or pitying but mostly not caring at all.

*How to remove a bird from the belly of a monster:*

1) Climb until you are wedged so deeply that you are another part of the monster, another piece of cast-off furniture, an old ironing board, the rusted out remnants of a charcoal grill. (Wonder when the last time you got a tetanus shot was).

2) Instruct yourself not to think about all the things that could stop you. Blood, fire, fear. (But mostly fire.)

3) With one arm, reach in deeply (do not ask how the old man got this here because he does not know either). Wrap your fingers around the bars of the cage inside and pull and pull until the beast groans with the force of it. Metal and fiber and glass will creak around you. You will see the sunlight shimmering in mason jars deep inside of it. You will be tangled in a labyrinth of reforged garbage. This is what it means to be lost. This is one of a thousand ways in which you can be lost. You’re lost.

4) Pull until you’ve recovered yourself and the bird in the cage with it. Ignore the hollowness at the center of the monster. The way the wind rushes in, carrying with it, now, white flecks of ash falling like snow.
5) When you are still high enough to fall, fall. The ground will catch you, one way or another.

I knocked the breath clear from my lungs. I stared up the trees, gasping. D.G. in his cage fluttered madly, somehow okay, and if my lungs didn’t hurt so badly I would say I’m sorry. I’m sorry for dragging you down with me.

Gradually my lungs opened up enough to allow me small sips of air. I sat up feeling rubbery. I had not fallen far but I was lucky. Testing my legs I stood.

George held the cat to his chest. It watched me, no longer purring. “It will never be the same again,” he said. “That was the last piece. It will never be finished, now.”

“You can’t put a live animal in there,” I said. “You can buy another bird cage to stick in there. You can even have this one. It’s fine.”

He looked at me, his eyes clear and steady. “I found all the pieces and you lost them again.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “We have to go.”

One of the crows fluttered down and landed on the cage and let out a horrendous squawk. I took a step backward. That black beak looked sharp—thinner and shinier than the beak of a raven. It cocked its head, blinking with dark eyes, then speared its beak between the bars. The canary flapped its wings, not voicing its fear. Did canaries have a song for fear or did they use the same song for everything?

The other crow fluttered down too and while its cohort continued to savage the bars of the cage it regarded me with eyes too pale.
I felt something tear inside of me. There was a gleaming in the earth at my feet and I picked up the small ax that lay there. “Get away from me,” I said to them both. “Get away, and leave us alone.”
Burn and Dodge

We want your story, they said. You insist on living in a broken world and we want to collect all those lost pieces. All the times you have broken over the years we will find the fragments of you left behind. You are that glued pottery showing the bright fissure of what you have lost. The fracture lines in your skin are the places we will put our claws in and tear. We will weave ourselves into the empty spaces inside of you. This is the slow rot. The people that have hurt you have left rooms uninhabited and we will live there. The people that you have hurt we will live inside them too. The pills you have taken to fix you, the things you have learned to fill the empty pockets of your brain, are the ships we ride in on. The incense and the Om and the pilates and the multicultural museums and the Chinese buffets that serve scrambled eggs and the amusement parks that make you throw up the fried food you just paid too much for and the tropical resorts with fifty bean-shaped pools and a thousand palm trees and the endless cities of glowing malls and the parking lots that glue them together and the car you’ve always wanted and the TV you’ve always needed and the classes you slept through in college and the late nights scraping yourself bare between stars and pavement we’ve been there with you too, weaving memories out of shadows and dreams out of memories, picking up your garbage. In a world of seven billion people there are seven billion strangers and no room left for you or your story, only the lost pieces, the ones you will never get back.
I swung. I missed and grazed the cage with the blade of the ax. It rattled but the crows remained. “Sorry, D.G.” I said. I swung again at the hovering crow and missed entirely with the violence of it. I nearly fell against the sculpture, stumbling.

I wanted to hurt them. I wanted to hurt the things that had decided they wanted to hurt my bird. Remember. The bird was the only thing I had.

A light ash fell now like snow. The only snow this part of the world ever saw. I had no idea how close it was. The fire, I mean. I felt the heat of it all through me and heard the crackling of it in my ears though the woods remained still and whole. The crows squawked in mockery and continued to thrust their beaks into the cage. D.G. fluttered a tiny storm.

I measured the heft of the ax in my hand. I’d never been very good at using tools, at aiming and moving and hitting a target but now, with this ax, there was no way I could miss.

I struck one crow in the breast with the blunt side of the ax, knocking it back from the cage to the ground. It fluttered, unable to get up. “I hate you,” I said. “I hate birds.”

The other one flew straight up, and I swung back the other way and I felt the blade pierce, felt the snap of the wing clear through me, the breaking of a bone I never knew I had. It reeled and clung to the sculpture, squawking. Blood dripped to the ground. For some reason I hadn’t thought of birds as being able to bleed. They’d always seemed bloodless—feathers and bones and air. The first one remained quiet in the dust though it flapped and struggled. It seemed unable to make a sound.

I put my foot on its neck. “Be quiet,” I said, and bore down.

The world broke inside of me.
The broken-winged bleeding crow squawked again. Its dark eyes stared me down.

“You too,” I said, and swung the ax again.

When has anything I’ve ever done been so final?

Goodbye Burn, Goodbye Dodge. I think part of me died to keep the rest of me alive.
M-

It would be nice to hear from you, you know. Just once. When I think about you often you are still nine years old, still wearing that hideous pair of overalls. It would be nice to be able to have mental conversations with an adult and not a child. It would be nice to imagine you here with me.

I don’t travel as much as I used to—money gets tight, and there is always new paperwork to sign. But yesterday I took the sleeper train to Venice. The people I shared my car with left the window open and cold air poured in all night. But if we shut it, it was stifling. I slept poorly. On the edges of some dream we stopped at a border—which one, I’m not sure. For a long time I lay there hazy with sleep. Voices echoed through megaphones, seeped into my ears. That night was thick like cream. Those are the worst nights, I think—the ones that feel like you’ve stumbled upon a memory you weren’t supposed to have. They make me feel like I’m still stuck in the States with you, in that stifling little house with our stifling little parents. Of course they loved us. But it was the blind kind of love, the obligatory kind. There’s no way of breathing with those people, in that place. That whole empty sprawl of buildings and people drained of history, of any kind of memory at all.

I opened my window. It would be nice to know if you did too.

-A
The girl picked up the bird in the cage and looked at him. “We gotta go,” she said.

“Come on.”

He looked at the Project. There was a hollowness inside of it he would never be able to fill again.

She reminded him of Penny, unable to sit still for too long. Or maybe he was only thinking of Penny and this girl was nothing like her at all.

“Penny would have liked to meet you,” he said. “But she’s already gone.”

“Please, George,” the girl said. He remembered her name: Myna.

The ash fell thicker now, its own kind of weather.


The cat in his arms was struggling. It leapt from his arms and shot into the woods.

They both looked after it and then the girl looked at him like she was waiting for him to tell her what to do. He knew he would never see that cat again.

“Okay,” he said.
In the Place of Forgotten Things

On the other side of the mountains in the place of forgotten things—a hard journey through ice and snow that numbs and strips away your name—travelers descend into a broad open plain. In this borderland there are midden heaps, there are the castoffs, the wreckage, the things we tried to forgot but couldn’t, the things we left behind for bad and worse reasons, the things we couldn’t let go. Always scavengers clamber on these piles, digging for the broken television sets, the rusting streamlined cars, meals with cream and raspberries. Occasionally they exclaim with delight. The ravenous flies are many and persistent. A buzzard overhead moves in and out of the white heat of the sun.

Thirsty I walk into the desert beyond. Water wells in my footprints.

The desert has its own vertigo. The sky presses in on me, and the world is scraped back. The blankness of the earth is accusation and penance. Sand blows across the carcasses of cars, of carriages, the bones of the horses that pulled them. The shadows stay deep in the rock with the water and trickle out at dusk.

I am following the child, a small shape silhouetted against stars. He occasionally squats to investigate the last fragments of forgetfulness, the pieces of things once whole. Tiny flags torn in half. The feather of an ivory-billed woodpecker. The handle of a child’s cup.

He wears a coonskin cap and has two orange-tipped plastic pistols in the holsters at his waist. He pushes his bike ahead of him in the sand.

He knows the way back.
32. A Note on Fire

Like most wild places, redwood forests are meant to burn. The wood has evolved with fire and the thick fibrous bark resists it. When the tree is wounded the fire will creep underneath the bark and hollow them out into black-charred chimneys. Travelers stand inside them and gaze up at a small disc of blue. They carve their names into the blackened walls of the tree cave. Just as cavemen sought immortality in sunless rooms of stone, we scratch pieces of ourselves into the remnants of fire.

In old-growth forests—the forests that have survived raging fires unseen and unremembered by people—the flames sweep through low and cleansing. Fire releases nutrients into the soil and sweeps debris from the forest. Huckleberry bushes and fiddlehead ferns and blankets of sorrel revive and flourish. You can see the years of this in the rings of the fallen—two thousand-year-old trees keep a different kind of memory, the kind that lingers even when we’ve forgotten how to look.

Dinosaurs and dragons raged in the flames. All the vanquished and forgotten resurrected. Scylla and Charybdis. The Gorgons. Horses with sharp meat-ripping teeth and serpents as big around as humans at the root of the world and three-headed dogs that roared from all throats like lions.
But when the forest has not burned in a while and the forest floor is thick and tangled with all the kinds of things that burn—this is when fire can climb to the crowns of enormous ancient trees and devastate.

I didn’t really believe there was a fire despite all the signs that pointed to it. I still thought this kind of devastation could be controlled. I heard in the distance the wail of sirens, a dubious promise of safety. I saw the ash falling on my shoulders. But when we returned at last to George’s sad little hut I looked back and saw the orange line on the horizon, the glow of the sinking afternoon sun almost overtaking us, and panic tightened my muscles. “The car,” I gasped, and maybe it was the smoke but I felt like I couldn’t breathe anymore. “It won’t start.”

“But anymore,” George mumbled.

I set down the bird cage and ran for the Buick. Now the key wouldn’t even fit. I’d get it three-quarters of the way and it jammed. I had the vague sense I just needed one thing, one last thing to make it work.

But I didn’t know how or what. My hands were shaking. I felt sorry for them—these frightened animals tethered to me.

“My car works,” said George. He stood by the open car door, the bird cage in his gnarled hand. Keys in the other.

I hadn’t even seen the old pickup in the shade of the tool shed. For some reason I’d thought George lived here and never left.
I grabbed my backpack and got out, shut the door, took his keys and went to try them. The engine roared and caught and my heart caught with it.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” I said. I took D.G. from him and wedged the cage behind the seats with my backpack. George got slowly into the front seat—he seemed to be moving slower and slower when I needed to be moving faster and faster. I could feel myself filling with a strange kind of electric energy and I didn’t want it but it was there anyway.

I couldn’t not ask. “Isn’t there anything.” I licked my lips, dry as paper. “Isn’t there anything you want to save?” I couldn’t imagine leaving all my stuff behind. Surely there would be one thing, at least, I would want to keep with me.

“Save?” George said. “No.”

I nearly protested—*there has to be something*—but that protest dissolved inside of me. I felt the fire in the woods—hovering, enormous, but maybe in no particular hurry, and I thought of that sculpture there in the woods all shot through with fire, and thought, again—so many things I have lost.

I backed the truck out onto the highway and drove west because the fire was burning up from the south and the east and this, it seemed, was away. Away from the sirens and their promise of danger. The windshield wipers rasped falling ash from the glass. The world seemed far quieter than it should be. Somewhere in the woods there was a monster of flame, chewing through the bones of this prehistoric forest.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

He asked me to drive him to the water and I said okay. I suppose I should have asked him which water he meant but it seemed obvious at the time and he didn’t protest as we drove west, leaving the smoke behind us.
D.G. remained silent the whole way.
Memory #4

The last time I saw Pops he stood in front of his house underneath the huge oak tree that hung over it, buckling the sidewalk and street with thick roots. It cast the dirty sparse yard into shadow and littered it with stiff brown leaves. I used to think the tree looked like a giant hand reaching up from the ground, about to pluck it from the foundations. I remember the fear of it.

We’d come over for some reason I couldn’t remember—just Mom and me—and now we were driving away. There was something cold in Pops’ face—something set like stone. Whatever he was thinking, those thoughts were stone too.

I was still young enough to be frightened by the sadness of adults. I was also old enough to let it slide away, to pull back from the window.

As we turned the corner he still stood beneath the tree, but he gazed across the street and not at us. A slim dark woman stood there. Maybe my memory is wrong.

“Would you like to get takeout for dinner?” Mom asked. “Maybe pizza? You can pick the toppings.” I didn’t care what she was apologizing for. The lack of enthusiasm in my face, I think, defeated her.

Pops rolled out of view, the world tilting us away. Mom called in an order for a pepperoni pizza without consulting me again.
Standing at the End of the World

When we got to the coast I pulled over at an overlook above an empty beach. The water stretched out before us, gray and claylike in the way it held the light of the sun slanting in from the west. There could be anything beneath that surface—monsters and cities—but to me it looked like death. Green-brown kelp floated on the surface, swaying with the slow inward swell. My hands shook on the steering wheel. I unpeeled them.

George opened the passenger door and got out. I watched him make his way slowly down to the beach, moving between the dunes as if he was an otherwise inanimate object propelled reluctantly by the soft breeze. I still smelled smoke but it was only the smoke we had brought with us.

He sat on a driftwood log bleached light gray by sun and salt. I stayed in the truck. For a long time neither of us moved—me in the cab and the old man down below me, the white of his hair holding the light as something delicate and sad. I sat and breathed and sat and breathed and I was not afraid anymore of the things I used to be afraid of, only new things, and that felt close enough to courage.

Finally I recovered my limbs and got down from the truck, lifting D.G. out of the back seat. He glared at me, feathers ruffled, and pecked at my fingers when they got too close.

“I know,” I said. “You’ve had a bad day.”

There was a crow feather still at the bottom of the cage. I lifted his cage to the hood of the car and knelt and gently blew the feather out through the bars on the far side.

“Sorry about that,” I said.

He chirruped, a quick cascade of notes strung out like beads.
I carried D.G. down to the sand and sat on the log with George and balanced the bird between us. I didn’t look at him. Though he was more present now he seemed transparent, especially in his face. I didn’t want to see what was behind it.

“I’m sorry about your sculpture,” I said. And your house. “Maybe the fire won’t get there.”

“The Project? You were right. It was no place for a bird.”

“The bird is yours,” I said. “I’m sorry I didn’t explain that before.”

“Mine?” He looked down at the bird, then out over the water. “No, I don’t think so.”

“You used to live at Parkview Apartments in San Francisco, right?” For a moment it occurred to me all my guesswork could be wrong.

“Yes,” he said in a tone of surprise, and I exhaled. “How did you know that?”

“My grandfather wanted me to give this bird to you, then. He said so in his will. Said he wanted me to give it back to you.”

“I’ve never owned a bird,” George said. “I don’t particularly like birds, myself. Though this little guy isn’t so bad.”

“Then why would my grandfather give you one?”

It was too chilly to be comfortable. I was beginning to regret leaving my sweatshirt behind. I resigned myself to shivering.

“I don’t know. Who was your grandfather?”

“Chuck--Charles Foster,” I said. I paused. How many times had I experienced this lack of words, this inability to describe a person, a thing as it actually was? Again I stood at Pops’ memorial, bereft of memory.
“He was average height,” I said. “Blue eyes. Played the piano?” I moved my fingers across an imaginary keyboard.

“I don’t know him.”

“Are you sure?” My voice cracked.

“My life has been very quiet. I remember everyone I have ever known, but I suspect most of them have forgotten me.” He looked at D.G. “It’s an interesting gift. Are you certain it’s for me?”

“You’re George, aren’t you?”

He laughed. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose.”

A seagull swooped in low over the water then up again without landing. Its shadow drew away with it. Further down the beach on the hard smooth sand, sandpipers swept in and out against the edges of the waves.

“I’m sure you’ve just forgotten,” I said. There was a hard pill of disappointment lodged in my throat. If all I had was the belief this one was the right George and there could be no other, I wanted to hold onto that belief and let it be strong enough.

He didn’t say anything. Probably out of kindness.

But even if this guy didn’t know or remember what the canary meant, at least Pops had. What would that be like? To let all the burdens you carried fall, the good ones with the bad. Pops wanted me to take the bird to a nearly disappeared man named George and I had and that at least must count for something.

D.G. trilled between us, and the notes went right through my heart. I pushed small mounds of sand around with my feet and collapsed them and looked out down the shore and
the long crescent moon of the shore, the white edges of the waves lapping in, the thin shapes of sky-mounted sea birds.

“Can I ask why you made the Project?”

“When I was younger,” he said. He lifted his hands. “I thought these hands were power. Maybe they were. I came into this world with a talent for putting things together and taking them apart and making things work.

“But you get old. The things you’ve made get old. Sometimes they break. Sometimes it’s through no fault of yours. But I was proud. I thought I was as good as anyone could be. But the world kept growing and splitting without my awareness—and so without knowing I was growing and splitting too. Like a tree. But here there were all these pieces, these things lying around, forgotten. I wanted to build something again. Something bigger than myself.”

“You sound like Jagger,” I said.

He spread his fingers, not listening to me. “It’s not anything I can say,” he said, and there was something edged in his tone. Maybe directed at himself, maybe directed at me, and I didn’t push it anymore. I only wanted an explanation for that feeling in my chest as I saw that huge sculpture. That resonating force—some string plucked deep within me. I think part of me was still hanging onto it, climbing inside, entangled with some other beating heart, one great unyielding bond when everywhere around me I saw bonds falling away, leaving us with…what?

With a canary at the edge of the world, that’s what.

“Thank you for driving me here.” George said. “But it would be best if you left now, I think. You probably have people wondering about you.”
I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to leave but it felt like that might be the wrong thing to do. So instead I got up and walked down the beach. My sneakers sank into the sand. Here at the thin edge I felt insubstantial too, sure of my place on neither one side nor the other.

I called Ruby. I had no other friends in this part of the world. I didn’t know what to say to her. Her voice seemed very far away when she answered, like she was holding the phone away from her face. I had to speak down that distance to reach her.

“Ruby,” I said, “I have a huge favor to ask you. Can you come pick me up?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Are you sure?” I said, and described where I was.

“Myna, I’m your friend. Of course I’ll come.”

Eventually I wandered back to George who was still sitting there quietly beside the bird. We looked out over the water together for a long time, the afternoon sun golden on our faces, deeper orange now with the flavor of smoke.

The sun was dipping behind the wide line of the horizon when Ruby’s car pulled up at the overlook, tires popping on loose gravel. I stood, lifting my backpack. My legs felt uncertain beneath me.

George did not look up from the sea the distance in his eyes making me grateful he didn’t. “I’ll leave D.G. with you then,” I said. Without looking at me he rested his hand on the cage. D.G. bobbed on his perch and sang at me and I thought maybe I could never hear that sound again without my heart breaking in some small way.

“What does D.G. stand for?” George asked.

“Ah.”

“Goodbye,” I said to both of them.

It was hard to walk away from D.G., harder than I thought it would be. Like tearing away a small part of myself to leave here. Shakespeare’s pound of flesh, feathered and yellow.

Ruby was waiting for me when I ascended. Seeing her was like seeing a mirage and what it meant for her to be there meant more than the fact it was her. I hadn’t realized how lonely I was

“Hi,” she said as I got in. “I guess I found you.”

I hugged her. She patted my back. “Bad day?” she said. “You reek of smoke.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Haven’t I told you to stop that?” She looked around. “Where’s the bird?”

I shrugged. “Nevermind,” she said. “I never liked that stupid bird anyway.”

I started laughing and crying at the same time. “How’s Jagger?” I asked, sniffing.

“Which one?” she said, and then she was laughing too. “We haven’t talked in a few days,” she said. “Things are kind of up in the air right now.”

I saw the glassiness in her eyes. “How’s everything else?” I said.

“Oh, you know,” she said. “The world’s ending again. But what else is new? Come on. I’d like to get back on the 101 before dark.”
George’s Last Day

He stands at the edge of the water. The waves rush in on the backs of their forebears and roll back all together in the gurgle of gravel and foam.

He lied to the girl. He does remember her grandfather, but it is a vague and bleak memory and full of the years of him he wants to forget when all his ties to the world were broken. He is surprised that the man remembered him—he’d looked at nothing but the woman he’d carried into his mechanic’s shop late one night. George had been still in his twenties, not yet a builder, and they hadn’t been much older, that man and that woman. He’d done what he could. His hands had been covered with blood but the woman died anyway. He never found out what had happened, where that wound had come from, what the grave man had done with her, taking her away. Instead of thanking him the man had only said “She loved to sing,” in a voice that cracked each word into eggshells. He’d sat against the back wall of George’s shop, alone and staring across the alley to the wall on the other side, and George had brought him whiskey and the man had not touched it so George sat there with him and George had been the only one who cried though shamed he hid it. Before dawn the man asked George for his name and he gave it. He had not realized so much of him had stayed with someone else. And then that man had sent his granddaughter. Now that he stands here at the end, he thinks he may know why.

He laughs: all of this time he has given the best of himself to Penny but she is gone now. She is never coming back and he is never going to look for her. Instead: this is the part of him that has come back. He opens the cage.

“You decide what to do,” he says to the canary. Where the canary will go is a part of all he will never learn, just like that dying woman with the long black hair whose name he
would never know. Just as the girl will never know about the woman who must have haunted her grandfather all those years. There are some stories that will never get finished. Other lives passed over. Terror seeps into him. Alone on this beach he feels far away from everyone else. Far from the sun overhead. He exhales then and the terror passes as the wind passes over him and through him.

“It’s okay,” he says to himself and to the bird. “Not every story has to be yours.” The bird hops on its perch seemingly unaware of the open door.

He closes his eyes and listens to the crash and draw of the waves. It is a constant sound. It is the edge of the earth breathing. He stands at the end of the world and listens. And listens.

When he opens his eyes the bird is gone.

Now, this moment: this is his last connection to the world. Someone will find him, the shell of him on the beach surrounded by so many other dead creatures. Someone will find him and someone will have to decide what to do.

It’s a little thing to ask and all he wants.

“Someone,” he says into the deepening sunset, remembering. “Someone will have to feed the cat when I’m gone.”

He takes off his shoes and his socks and puts the latter inside of the former. He rolls up his pant legs neatly to his knees. He walks to the edge of the water and stands there. The cold water—and it is cold here, touched by far northern places—slides in over his feet and out. He stands there between shore and sea and lets the moments stretch out one into the next, building his own kind of eternity.
M-

I may not have been entirely honest with you. Most of the adventures I’ve told you about happened years ago. Some details I do not remember as I should, and perhaps I have embellished. But when you come to see me I will show you all of the places I have been. I will show you all the secrets of these ancient cities I have been to and returned from. There are so many layers to them beneath the stuff they polish up for tourists—the museums and the monuments and the local trademark cuisine. There are alleyways where people have carved their names into stone and framed paintings hanging in basements. There are stones worn into smooth depressions by the passage of centuries of feet. From the window of a train once I saw a fox on a rise watching us. I’ve seen the fields of tulips and the deserts of Spain. You’d be surprised I think at how much Spain can look like home and also how different.

You’d be surprised at how much there is to see here. How much I can show you.

-A
A Conversation with Clary

As we drove into dusk and the blackness of trees a chill set in. Ruby turned on the heater but I could not feel it. I pulled my smoky sweatshirt over my head and curled into the passenger seat, watching the yellow reflectors in the road flit by. Ruby’s car moved with a comfortable drone and I felt the road shaking through me.

It took me a minute to realize that my phone was vibrating too. Clary called. She was crying.

“Clary?” I said, because that wasn’t like her at all.

“Yes,” she said, and kept crying. I could only tell because she was swallowing gasps of air like she was drowning in the wetness that clung to her voice, the wet sadness hovering between us.

“What’s wrong,” I said, walking faster. I felt like I could drown in her voice.

“Nothing. Nevermind.”

“What?” I said.

“Oh, like you’d understand,” she said. “You left.” She hung up. I gripped the phone hard. How did she know what I would understand or didn’t understand? I had not been gone so long.

A story about Clary (I told to myself, a passenger on a dark road):

Clary stands on the sidewalk with her coworker. She does not understand what she has seen. The dog—and doesn’t that dog look somehow familiar—and then the little boy.

“Who’s that,” Max says, and she thinks he’s talking about the crazy old bum, the one who keeps waving his arms and babbling and she is about to say Who cares, but then she
sees he is not gaping at the old man like everyone else—staring at the burning tractor and the array of yellow machinery and the half dug foundations for *Pinecrest Homes* in a forgotten tangle of suburban forest, along a nearly invisible creek choked by tires and rusty bedsprings and the better parts of old refrigerators. The others stare at the approach of the ambulance wail and the man who gets into it, and Clary thinks there is a man who will always have a scar but never really understand how he got it. The people stare at the dog. The people stare at all the emptiness that will stay emptiness now as long as the men in the hard-hats continue to mutter about curses and fear that has no source but the absence of understanding. She recognizes some of them—people who work in her office, people who she crosses paths with at this time of day in this part of time.

But Max is looking at the boy. Collecting his bike. That ragged dog bouncing around him.

Clary feels something like a tumor in her throat. That strange disease. “That’s my little brother,” she hears herself say. “Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a ghost before.”

Max looks at her now. He has dark circles under his eyes and his skin has taken on the translucence of the ill or grieving, and she thinks about how similar the two of them are, grief and illness, how they go hand-in-hand and sometimes kill the same way and then the stray thought, *Why hasn’t she died yet.*

Even in this pain there’s still no void for her to fill.

The little boy pulls his coonskin cap tight over his wild dark hair and pulls out one of his toy plastic pistols with the bright orange tips and aims it straight at each of the tractors in turn. He is whispering something, the same word over and over, and she cannot tell what it is. His face is tear-streaked and he scrubs at it with the back of his sleeve and the dog is
licking his hand and he grins at the dog and kicks off with one foot and weaves back and forth until he finds his balance and then he is biking away legs pumping wildly. He jumps his bike off the sidewalk and the dog jumps with him and the two of them are leaving in something like joy. When they turn out of sight she hears the dog bark, one sharp sound punctuating the morning.

Then even though the police are there to collect the old bum she is done. She goes to work because that was what she has to do. That is where she was going. And when she gets to work she locks herself in a storage closet and starts crying, pulling things off the shelves until she is surrounded by toilet paper and paper towels and full blue bottles of Windex and tablets of hand soap and air freshener and paper and cubes of ink and hissing boxes of paper clips and staples and a whole thundering box of scissors, building herself a nest out of sadness.

“Who was that?” Ruby asked.

“Oh,” I said, drawing my sweatshirt closer around me. “Someone you don’t know.”
A woman peers between curtains, her face wasted by illness. She moves like the old man who walks through the wood losing something of himself with every step, like the boy riding a bike past me in the street. Like a small yellow bird in a cage. There are some people I pass on the highway and people I have sat next to in class. There are double takes. There is déjà vu. I have the feeling of knowing them once, that we were all one person once, and we all know, always, we are all only pieces of something broken.
The Place of Forgotten Things

At the edge of the place of forgotten things the sand trails into stars, whipping up into devils and dissipating with the last traces of our memories. The ocean stretches out and pours from the edges, water rumbling into the darkness that stretches out and out and out before me and gleams from somewhere inside of you that hurts.

The child has gone ahead of me. My feet mire in the sand to my knees.

I listen to the thundering of water, and watch the little yellow bird fly between filaments of the rising sun.

“Maybe you are a piece I lost a long time ago.”

But birds have no language that we speak, and my own words sound meaningless.

I grasp at the substance of shadow, the thread that will anchor me to my own story. I feel the stuff of the world between my fingers and hold fast.

The sun rises over the end of the world.
You Are Riding Away.
The Dog Leaps Beside You.
You Will Find A New Place To Keep All The Things That Have Been Forgotten.
35. Home

Without Jagger and Jagger in the apartment it felt clean and very empty. All the 
clutter of his art projects had been boxed up and labeled with J’s and stacked in the corner. 
The apartment did not feel like a place where people would be dreaming anymore. “He took
the Easter tree with him,” Ruby told me inconsequentially. I nodded.

“You can stay as long as you like,” she said, and I wanted to tell her no, no. That is
exactly what I cannot do. This place is full of echoes that hit me sideways.

Ruby’s apartment had become a ghost-place.

“Thanks,” I said. I showered to get the smell of smoke out of my skin. The shower
where Jagger had his art project was clean again. There was no sense of falling anymore, no
sense of slipping. The water was cold but I didn’t want to turn it any hotter. My feet felt very
firm on the slick bottom of the tub and I could feel underneath my skin all the ways my body
hurt. There was a hollow space behind my navel.

I dressed and went for a walk and even though it was still August it was San
Francisco and the fog had blown in wet and gusty with the night. I wore a jacket and still I
was cold hunched inside of it, my tenuous shelter. The people around me slid away like
empty spirits of themselves. For the first time in my life I felt no need to look over my
shoulder. I knew no one was following me. My phone rang and I stopped at the intersection
of two streets I had never been on before and looked at the illuminated number on my screen
and sighed and held it to my ear.
“Hi, Mom,” I said. I could not remember the last thing I had said to her—whether I was supposed to be angry with her, or pity her, or love her. I knew I was supposed to be there. I expected Mom to yell at me but she was crying. “I got an email from Allie,” she said. “She says she’s never coming home.”

**Interlude:**

“So what are you going to do now?” Ruby asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said. Rain poured over her face—headlights through the moisture on her window.

“Are you going to go back to school?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve only missed the first few days. I’ll go back to school and finish my last year. I’ll go back and then. I don’t know. I don’t think I’ll ever figure it out.”

“No one says you have to go back,” Ruby said.

I didn’t tell her I’ve been getting those for two years. It didn’t seem to matter. I deleted each one unread. “That’s all you got out of that?” I said, very distant to my frustration. “It doesn’t register with you she’s alright? She’s okay?”

“Oh,” Mom said. “I always knew she would be.”

And me? And me?

“So what?” I said. “She left half a lifetime ago. I could have told you she was never coming back.”
“Mothers never give up hope,” Mom said, sniffing, her voice twisting into something harder. “It was that grandfather of yours, that damn grandfather. How he could help her I will never understand.”

The surprise boomed in my chest. No wonder they stopped speaking to him. I swallowed.

“What about Dad?” I asked. “How’s he?”

“If you were here like you said you would be,” she said, “Then you would know.”

“I’m coming back,” I said. “I’m coming home. So tell me how he is.”

“He’s gone,” she said. “His mind is gone off somewhere and I don’t think he’s coming back.”

A chill swept through me. “I see.”

“Why won’t Allie come home?” Mom said, and deep inside the phone I heard the reverberations of thousands of voices all chattering at once, all trying to sell something and buy something simultaneously, pleading for a moment of my time, of anyone’s time, making the small offerings of the trinkets in their possession. And they were all asking the same question, all begging and fighting and calling for the same thing. *Come home come home come home.* It became a kind of chant, a deep and inarticulate murmur of sound stripped of meaning, of signifier, a sound meaning nothing except the thing that it was.

I let them be.

“That was Allie’s mistake to make,” I said. “And this one was mine. I’ll be home in the morning,” I said, and hung up.

I walked to the Marina and set out along the water. Joggers slid around me, past people on their evening walk, past party kids at the beginning of weekend benders. They all
moved inside separate bubbles, microbes in a stream, rolling around each other in subtle variations of current. I moved in my own bubble too.

I looked for birds in the sky but saw none. The water was smooth as steel. There were no white crescents of sail on it now. On my walk I saw no one die. I saw no one collapse to the ground. Death had fallen back to private worlds.

I felt the city breathe around me. I felt it like a marble of pain and joy, the universe before the bang, the soul before the birth.

**Interlude:**

“No one says you have to go back,” said Ruby. “You could stay here, as long as you need to. I could find you a job, probably.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to cause problems for you and Jagger.”

Her hurt was carved in her face. “I don’t know how you could have,” she said. She did not want to hear it.

“You’re right, though,” I said. “I don’t have to go back.”

I smiled and kept smiling until she smiled too.

Taking the bus that night was easy without a bird. The nearly empty bus thrummed in a fluorescent glow, the places I had passed in my northward course slipping by as the bulk of night and the dormant shadows it contained.

Later I would call the woman who worked at the pet shop. “This is the last time I will bother you,” I would say. “The last time I will ask for anything.”

“Fine,” she would say with a long-suffering sigh. “Ask.”
“The fire’s out now, right?”

“More or less.”

“Did they—find anything strange in the woods?” I’d say. “Like a sculpture?”

“Sculpture? Damn kids—what were you up to back there?”


“Just the bird,” she’d say. “Just the bird.”

“So did they find anything?” I would have followed the news, of course. Knowing now that George’s place was gone forever.

“In that wasteland? How the hell should I know? Ask them,” she’d say and hang up, and I’d sit there with my phone in my hand wondering about the words we used and the gestures they implied and the growing distance between what things were and what they meant, everything referring to actions no longer made or places no longer seen and things no longer felt.

*Oh, little yellow bird, I’d think, come back and tell me what I’ve lost.*

But for now I dreamed of the sculpture the old man had called the Project—heavy-eyed and reptilian, prowling through a primordial forest of fire, its heart glowing yellow out of its bones.

I woke up when the bus arrived at the bus stop, cold in the early morning and radiating the greater chill of concrete. I did not want to call my mother for a ride. I thought about calling Clary but the memory of the grief in her voice stayed me.

So I started walking. It was a good five or six miles home. I was not accustomed to measuring this kind of distance and now I measured it with my feet and a fair piece of my
time. And they carried me into familiar country, and then down a familiar street, and up the
driveway to a familiar door. The simplicity of this process, the ease of this connection
between one place and another, cut into me. It seemed I had been away longer than I had.
Months, or years even.

I let myself in.

“Mom?” I said. The house felt cool and clean and had a new smell to it that did not
welcome me. There was a nurse in the kitchen, head bowed over the tea she was preparing at
the counter. She glanced at me and away. She seemed like no one I could have ever known.

“There you are,” Mom said. “I was looking for you.”

“Where’s Dad?”

She looked up toward their room. “Upstairs.”

I followed her gaze with mine. It occurred to me maybe Dad would rather be in his
office with his books, even if he didn’t want to read them anymore.

“Come here,” she said, and folded me into a hug. I resisted the urge to resist. Her
perfume was overpowering and still I could smell the powder on her face. There were blue
circles under her eyes she could not cover up. Returning the hug I felt delicate bird-bones
beneath her skin, the gathering age. “I’m glad you’re back, Myna,” she said.

I was frightened of whatever had inhabited my mother.

“Upstairs?” I said.

“Yeah.”

I set my backpack down on the purple chair near the door and went upstairs. The door
was ajar. Dad lay on the bed, his eyes open and looking at the ceiling.
“Hi, Dad,” I said. He lifted a hand slightly. From the other side of the room I waved back, a lump in my throat. It felt like a hospital in my parents’ room. I opened the curtain and the window behind it and traffic and dust and summer drifted in.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said. The tears all pressing against the inside of my eyeballs. Memories bubbling up behind my face and fighting their way out. My dad and me playing baseball with matching A’s hats. My dad riding his bike behind mine, allowing me the illusion of freedom. My dad explaining how planets worked. And maybe these were memories many people had of their father but these were my memories of my father and they hurt all the same.

Dad made a slight gesture with his hand that may have been meaningless.

I took a deep breath and let it carry me one exhalation closer to whatever would happen next.

“There are a lot of things I could say right now,” I said. “It’s been a crazy couple of weeks. But all I really want to say is I love you, and Mom, and Allie too I guess. And Pops, though I never knew him except as a kid. And Clary, and Ruby, and yes Jagger, and even that old man George. I could’ve come back sooner. I could have, but I didn’t. Maybe I would have been able to tell you Pops will be okay because I made it so. So let’s say I met a man named George and he told me a story about a man named Charles who loved his son very much, no matter what his son said or did. Maybe I would have been able to tell you a different ending to this story. Maybe in that story you sit up and get out of bed and eat a good meal and go for a game of golf same as always. Maybe in that story you will always be a ghost.”
After I spoke the room filled with silence. I could hear no sounds of people. No voices. Something yellow fluttered at the edges of my vision like the memory of sunflowers. Like sunlight.

Then, this happened:

I leaned over my father. I leaned down close to his ear. The great sadness of the world seeping from him, his bones. “Still, Dad,” I said. “Every story happens once.”